

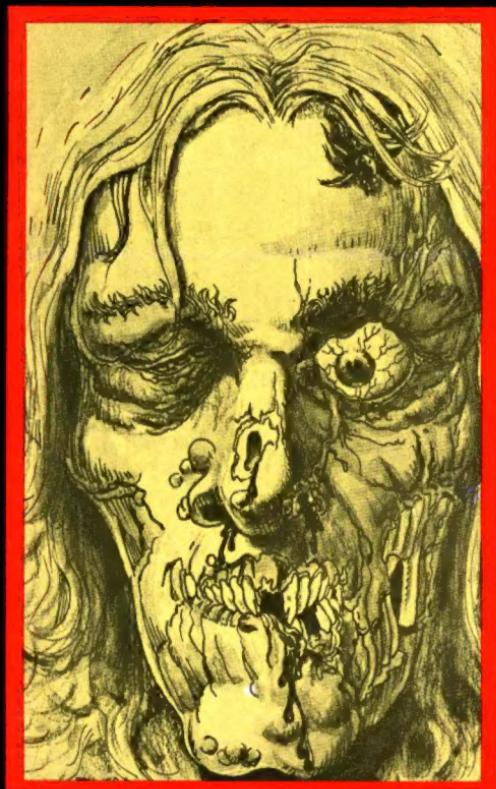
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February No. 35

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MAGAZINE OF
HORROR

THE BIZARRE, THE FRIGHTENING, THE GRUESOME



**A RENDEZVOUS
IN AVEROIGNE**

by CLARK ASHTON SMITH

**IN THE LAIR OF THE
SPACE MONSTERS**

by FRANK BELKNAP LONG

THE CHENOO

A "Shop" Story
by STEPHEN GOLDIN

THE ALTAR OF MELEK TAOS

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THE BIZARRE, THE FRIGHTENING, THE GRUESOME

Volume 6

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Robert A. W. Lowndes, Editor

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The Editor's Page

Ordinarily, just about the last thing I'd expect to read and find anything there worth the effort, is a column devoted to criticism of rock and pop music. However, I found an exception recently, in some of the comments of Gene Lees in *HIGH FIDELITY* magazine. I'd noted over the course of several years, first in *STEREO REVIEW*, where Lees used to hold forth, and now in *HF*, that his writings drew forth particularly venomous letters, and I thought to myself back then that a writer so detested must have something to say worth reading. So less than five years later, I started to read him.

... And found that, now and then, he does have something to say worth reading, such as his single page in the July *HF*, *Leave the Message for Western Union*, which starts with his opinion that "relevancy" is "One of the most sinister words ever to creep into the lexicon of artistic criticism..." He mentions that the subject was being debated at least as far back as the fifteenth century, and that Beethoven was seduced by it into writing *Fidelio*, "one of his least successful works precisely because he was concerned here with social statement rather than purely artistic communication." And he goes on to state: "The purpose of art is to move you, and in the process of moving you, to expand your soul. It is not to teach you lessons in social studies. He who can only apprehend a work of art that makes a statement on a social issue does not apprehend art at all."

All in all, this was a column I found worth reading, particularly since it was

one with which I found myself both agreeing and disagreeing at the same time; had it been all one way or the other, it would have been far less valuable. The comment with which I agree entirely may comfort me in a sense that it throws extra light on something I already accept; the comment which I cannot accept at all may help me to underline what I reject, but neither one stimulates much thought. It's this sort of mixed bag, which forces me to examine what parts of it seem wrong, and why (since they have to be examined in a context of agreement) that causes cerebral activity. And there is always that possibility of finding such re-examination may require alterations in various of my opinions.

Let's look at that word: "relevant." The *American Heritage Dictionary* defines it as: "...related to the matter at hand; to the point; pertinent." Before one can decide whether anything at all is "relevant," then, the first question is: "What is the matter at hand?"

Let's get back to Beethoven's opera *Fidelio*, for a moment, since here is where I disagree with Mr. Lees in part. *Fidelio* is an example of that rather strange artform known as opera, which is neither entirely a musical art nor entirely a dramatic one, but, in its best specimens a blending of both, such as we find in Mozart's *Don Giovanni*, Verdi's *Otello*, and Richard Strauss' *Salome*, to list three more examples. Since it is sung, rather than spoken (outside of the *singspiel* which was closer to our present-day notion of a musical than

anything else), and since the emotion to be presented is conveyed by means of music primarily, then the amount of information and ideas – particularly the latter – that can be effectively conveyed are far more limited than is the case with a play. (One of the reasons why I listed Strauss' *Salome*, rather than the more popular and lovable *Der Rosenkavalier*, is that the latter opera has the fault of being crowded with information at times. Strauss does the best he can with these sequences, but what happens is that information, some of it amusing in itself, but some of it necessary to comprehension of the plot, zips by you much too quickly to register, and the accompanying music, while no disgrace just isn't that good.) It is customary to deride the librettos of many famous operas, but in most instances, they fit the requirements very well; and had they been of such a nature as to make effective plays, detached from the music, the final result would have been less good, not better opera.

But every opera worth hearing is relevant to some aspect or aspects of the human condition and human emotions. It is true that Beethoven's *Fidelio* had an immediacy about it which it does not obtain here in the United States today. (On the other hand, the opera is very popular indeed in countries where people live under genuine oppression – but not with the authorities!) Nonetheless, all the motivations we find in the opera remain relevant: the young man in love with a girl who prefers someone else, that someone else inaccessible; the search for a victim of gross injustice; the hatred of a venal official for a man who has told the truth about him; the official's revenge and fear of discovery; the wife who risks all to find and release her husband. No country in the world has ever gotten so far toward perfect liberty and justice for

all so that the audience would remain unmoved. Whether there is any immediacy in relation to any particular audience is another question entirely. But no work of art can accomplish this criterion that Mr. Lees proposes: "...to move you, and in the process of moving you, to expand your soul..." without relevancy to common human emotions and ideals.

No, if the opera *Fidelio* can be considered short of Beethoven's best, (and I think it can, even though I do enjoy it), the reasons for this has nothing to do with the plot or the social elements or message in the story. We have ample evidence that Beethoven's vocal music, at its best, is a considerable distance from this composer's finest works. And had he chosen a libretto with no such "social" elements, I doubt that the opera would have been much better, if any better; he was at his best in music structures which are not suited for voices, even though you may find some lovely and singable tunes within them.

Even Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Ernest* remains relevant, being an ungentle but suave spoof on various aspects of human foolishness, as expressed in organized society. The play or story or work of music that is entirely irrelevant cannot move us at all. I have read about the music of John Cage wherein his works are criticised on those latter grounds, and certainly much material produced on a fanatic "art for art's sake" basis comes out both unmoving and irrelevant for that very reason, whether this can justly be said about Mr. Cage or not.

The current cry for "relevancy" is based partly upon the corruption of English, so that an inappropriate word is being made into a slogan. It is not relevancy but immediacy that is demanded: immediacy to what is going

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on right now, right at this minute — and, of course, relevancy in the sense of being pertinent to this minute. And it is immediacy that is fatal to art, unless it is so well fused with over-all relevancy to the timeless human condition that the date is the least important thing about it. A work that is truly relevant to human aspiration for liberty and justice achieves immediacy whenever there is something going on in the reader's or listener's consciousness that he can relate to the outside world right now. But it is not necessary for great art that there be this instant relation (which is what "immediate art" — bad art — is supposed to accomplish), for the work to accomplish its basic function of expanding the soul through the process of moving the person. There's no such thing as instant soul-expansion.

Fidelio was more or less immediate in that the sort of "rescue drama" of which this is an example was very popular at the time. It was not immediate in that it was about any particular instance of injustice which the audience was expected to be moved to protest or demonstrate about.

To repeat what I've said elsewhere, art is not journalism. I recall John Campbell telling me around 1940 that for months after the famous "Wrong-Way Corrigan" incident he received many manuscripts which could be boiled down all too easily to "trip forbidden, protagonist got there by fortuitous 'accident,'" needless to say, they were rejected.

A work which is truly relevant may dip in and out of immediacy, so far as any particular reader or group of readers may be concerned; or as happens more often, certain parts of such a work can slip in and out of immediacy. This applies to any work of fiction, whether written for mass entertainment or to express the author's feelings and insights within the

course of an interesting story. Just as an example: the drug scene in E. E. Smith's *Lensman* series, where criminals are in league with outside enemies of humanity who are using a massive narcotic campaign for the purpose of undermining civilization, and eroding its ability to resist has a relevancy to the immediate situation today that it did not have in the late 30's, when the magazine versions of *Galactic Patrol* and *Gray Lensman* first appeared. The strategy of debauching one's enemy or rival (either on the individual or national level) is one of the oldest in history, and is therefore at all times relevant in fiction; the precise means may or may not be immediate. However, does the fact that this particular element in the *Lensman* series has immediacy now make the stories any better or any worse than they were back in the 30's, or in the 50's when the revised hard-cover complete series came out? I don't believe it either helps or hurts.

Eddy C. Bertin's story in the first issue of *BIZARRE FANTASY TALES*, *A Taste of Rain and Darkness* seems rather immediate, simply because we've read so much about this sort of bizarre individual in the past two decades. But that is not why it is a good story. It's a good story because it is done with artistic integrity; because it relates to fears and desires that are common to all men, to one extent or another; because such things did not start to happen since Freud but have always happened in history. It is truly pertinent to some of the more unsavory aspects of the human condition, and it presents the reader with an opportunity to understand himself. That is, the reader who reads and searches his soul and realizes that under certain conditions he might be just like that, has not only been moved by the story, as the artist hoped, but has

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expanded his own soul. For we do not grow by erecting antiseptic shields against seeing all the darker elements in our nature, but through recognizing that each of us may have the potentialities of being either a saint or a monster (as the great saints and monsters had), of choosing, and of struggling to maintain that choice.

But Mr. Bertin was not writing a story with an instant message to send you out on to the streets to confront anyone at all. Yet his story is splendidly relevant, and I believe that it will be remembered.

And again to repeat what I've said elsewhere: I'm convinced that most, if not all, of the lasting stories we read — the ones we read and reread and find our succeeding generation picking up too — are stories which the author did not write with any preconceived message or immediacy in mind. On the other hand, most, if not all, of the stories written with urgent immediacy in mind — the ultra-Now stories — become obsolete very quickly; and most are bad stories in the first place. There was one that appeared a year or so ago; it was apparently an ultra-liberal view of the Vietnam War transferred to another planet, and bad enough to remember vaguely. The title and author's name has escaped me, and the story wasn't so magnificently bad that I'm likely to remember it for years to come. (There is such a thing as the magnificently bad story, that sticks with you, and which you may even sneak away somewhere and reread. For me, *The Blind Spot*, by Homer Eon Flint and Austin Hall is a prime example.)

H. P. Lovecraft's stories were never, or

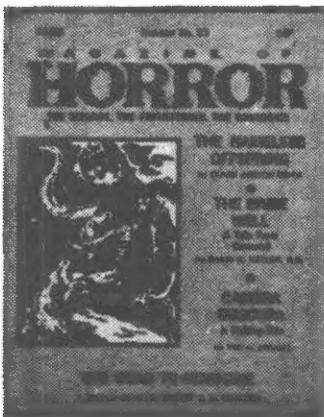
at the most, hardly ever, immediate; yet his comeback into popularity shows that they were and are relevant to the human condition. Fear and wonder are part of us all, however atrophied wonder may be in many of us. Imaginary fears, which we know to be imaginary, have their appeal. It's a more sophisticated appeal than the one based upon horrifying descriptions of something which might indeed happen. *Murgunstrumm*, by Hugh B. Cave could very easily give the person who believes in vampires nightmares; for the rest of us, I believe it is a very effective pretend sort of frightening. And not all pretend, for there is one element in it that had immediacy when it was written in 1932 and still has it now: the readiness of officials to declare the person who claims supernormal experience insane simply on the grounds of the claim, without investigating. Was Mr. Cave deliberately putting a "message" into this thriller? I have no idea; but I suspect that he was merely working out the logical consequences of his fictional premises. This aspect of *Murgunstrumm* may or may not be immediate when you read it; but it is relevant, and will remain so, so long as arrogant individuals in places of power consider themselves, in effect, high priests of the great idol, science. (Which is not to demean science in itself or the true scientist, who is essentially a humble person.)

So I agree with Mr Lee's loathing for so-called art based upon that kind of relevancy which is restricted to the point of immediacy. Despite the slowdown of all manner of services, that sort of message can, indeed, be left to Western Union. RAWL



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THE ALTAR OF MELEK TAOS

by G. G. Pendarves

(author of *From the Dark Halls of Hell*, *The Whistling Corpse*, etc.)

All weird stories of devil-worship do not necessarily concern the "Devil" described in the Old Testament and the New Testament, and three authors who contributed frequently to Farnsworth Wright's *WEIRD TALES* wrote stories relating to the devil-worship of the Yezidees, whose supreme being is the Bright Angel, Melek Taos (or Malik Tawus), and is symbolized by a peacock. E. Hoffmann Price has his series-character, Pierre d'Artois, frequently come up against the followers of Malik Tawus, and in Seabury Quinn's *The Devil's Bride*, it is the Bright Angel, rather than the Biblical Satan, who is the devil-in-chief — even though various adherents to the conspiracy indulge in traditional Black Masses at times. G. G. Pendarves, who had a solid reputation with the magazine's readers by 1932, prefers the "Melek Taos" rendering, and this tale is held strictly within the legend of the Magi.

SIR HUGH WILLETT caught sight of his wife's gold-crowned head at the far end of the table, and his lips twitched in a smile as he noted the rapt expression of the gray eyes under their unexpectedly dark brows and lashes. Evidently she was carrying out his instructions to "keep Prince

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(Illustrated by
T. Wyatt Nelson)

Dena amused" with whole-hearted zeal. The constant steady flame of his adoration for Evadne—so young, and lovely, and gifted—gave a sudden leap to his breast. She was adorable.

"I've never seen Evadne look better, Hugh."

The voice of the Honorable Mrs. Richard Gaunt echoed his own thoughts, and he turned to the well-known writer and autocrat of London society with an almost fatuous beam. "This climate suits her, suits us both, in fact."

"D'you let her run around with her paint-box here in Bagdad, as she did in Cairo? It's not very safe!"

"Do I let her!" Sir Hugh's face was a study in mock despair. "My dear Mildred, you know Evadne pretty well. Why revert to the obsolete and empty mockery of a husband's authority in connection with Evadne?"

"You're right," laughed his dinner partner. "But, really, I must

acknowledge she can be trusted. I've never met a girl with her head screwed on more firmly. The only danger is that it is such an exceptionally charming head. Just look at the minx now, beguiling that poor man out of his senses. Who exactly is this Prince? I didn't get his name."

"Prince Dena ibn Zodh! That is his usual title. The whole thing is Ca'id Dena al Il brahim ibn Azzad ibn Kadr el Amastan ibn Zodh!"

Mrs. Gaunt patted his arm soothingly. "There, there! I didn't mean to upset you like that, Hughie dear. This is not the time or place for blank verse, you know. What have you been drinking?"

"Fact!" replied Sir Hugh. "I wrote it down, and learned it while I was having my bath before dinner."

"It's a marvel you weren't drowned. But tell me seriously, Hugh, what does the creature do, besides looking so excessively haughty, and mysterious, and utterly fascinating? I feel like an ingenue at her first party whenever I look at him."

"I'll tell you later," he answered hastily. "My left-hand neighbor seems to be getting restive. She's been a victim to old Doctor Hamdi long enough to know that adventure of his in Damascus off by heart. I must rescue her."

The Honorable Mrs. Gaunt nibbled a few salted almonds thoughtfully, before turning to Sir Hugh's secretary, Hadur. He was an Arab of excellent birth and most scholarly attainments, having been educated at the famous medersa at Kairwan. As a young man he had been kidnapped by Touareggs in the Sahara Desert, sold to slave-traders, shipped to Mecca, and been bought in the slave-market there by Sir Hugh Willet, who recognized his birth and breeding. Passionately grateful, Hadur had refused to return to his Algerian home, and had attached himself to Sir Hugh as his secretary.

A great friendship had sprung up between the two, which Sir Hugh's recent marriage had not altered. Hadur had merely extended the cloak of his grave protection and friendship to include the wife as well as the husband. The twenty-five years that lay between her and himself (for Hadur was some ten years older than Sir Hugh) made this easy, and Evadne accepted the former's unfailing loyalty as a matter of course. She did not dream of the quite unplatonic devotion that lay beneath the Arab's solemn courtesy, nor did he desire that she ever should know of it. Hadur was a profound philosopher; his dreams were one thing, his actual life another. He saw to it that they never impinged on one another.

"I am going to ask you what I've been asking Sir Hugh," Mrs. Gaunt

turned to Hadur at last with an abstracted air. "Who and what is this Prince?"

Hadur presented a sphinx-like face to her questioning gaze. "I regret, Madam, I can tell you nothing."

"Can't or won't?"

"He is here for the first time as guest," Hadur countered smoothly. "Sir Hugh met him last week, while superintending the excavation of the Daarb Temple."

"Yes?"

"But, that is all, Madam!"

"Nonsense, Hadur." The downright lady was not to be so easily turned aside. "You can't bear the man, and you've been looking like the wrath of Allah ever since the soup. Do please explain."

"I wish I could." Hadur abandoned his tone of light pretence. "I can only say that there is an evil in that man beyond comprehension. I see the Sitt Évadne by his side, as if she slept within the coils of a rock python. He is entirely devilish."

His companion looked impressed; she was an intimate friend of the house, and trusted Hadur completely. "What are you going to do?" she demanded, always eminently practical.

Hadur's eyes, under the folds of his ruby-silk turban, lost a little of their melancholy at her manner. "The Prince is the guest of Sir Hugh," he reminded her.

"Guest! Sir Hugh!" Mrs. Gaunt's snorts of disdain were fortunately drowned by the lively chatter around them. "You know perfectly well that he would make friends with a Bengal tiger if the beast knew anything about the Assyrian empire! I suppose that is the bond that brought them together?"

"The Prince is surprisingly well informed," conceded Hadur.

"Oh, we were just discussing the fall of Babylon," she told Sir Hugh, as the latter relinquished his other neighbor to Doctor Hamdi once more.

"What?" Her host's deep chuckling laugh brought all eyes upon him. "What do you suppose old Hadur and Mildred were talking about?" he asked.

A roar of laughter greeted his reply, and Mrs. Gaunt defended herself ably from the volley of satire that followed.

"Are you getting foundations for your next novel?" one lady demanded. "Babylon will be a nice little change from modern London, dear."

"Very little change, in reality," retorted the novelist. "Mere

superficialities of food and clothing. The morals and manners of the two cities seem singularly alike. What do you say, Prince Dena?"

She appealed across the table as the latter's darkly brilliant face turned in her direction.

"I must confess that my visits to London have not suggested an analogy," he replied in a deferential manner, "probably because I've not had your unique opportunities of studying it. Babylon was different from every other city the world has known, because it drew its power direct from the supreme Source of power."

A puzzled silence greeted this remark. Mrs. Gaunt stole a glance at Hadur's stern, set face, and experienced a quiver of apprehension, reflecting on the violent and sudden nature of Oriental reactions.

"You are going too deep for some of us," Sir Hugh voiced the general opinion. "The philosophy and mysticism of the East are rather too subtle for me, I confess."

Prince Dena ibn Zodh smiled faintly and turned his dark face, with its chiselled features and inscrutable eyes, toward his hostess. "I perceive that you, as a mystic, are not out of your depth."

Evadne flushed. The poetry she wrote was very much of the mystic order, but she hated talking about it, never published it, and was startled by the Prince's divination of her abiding interest.

"You refer to the perverted use to which the Magi of the Assyrian empire put their gifts!" Hadur gravely interposed, successfully distracting interest from Lady Willett's slight confusion.

"Perverted use!" The Prince's level gaze clashed with Hadur's intent look.

"Surely!" asserted the latter, in the flat gentle voice that heralded his rare anger. "Since these same Magi forgot, or ignored, the mysterious laws of equilibrium which subjugated the universe to their control. Forsaking the law, they played with magic for the delight of king and courtiers, intoxicating them with every sensual joy. They forsook Ormuzd for Ahriman, and brought the Assyrians to the dusk."

"So!" Prince Dena paused, a dark flame in his eyes. "You recollect, however, that from ashes sprang the Phoenix!"

"And from the dust of Babylon sprang — ?" Hadur also paused.

The guests sat in tense silence, as if aware that some tremendous question had been asked. The atmosphere was electric with the antagonism between the two men. "From the dust of Babylon sprang the Angel Peacock — Melek Taos!"

The Prince raised his hand as he spoke. The candle — burning steadily in their crystal holders down by the long table — flared up into high tendrils

of flame. The hanging lamps overhead and in the wall-niches blazed with a sudden blue-white radiance. A golden flower-scented mist filled the spacious room; the sound of a reed-pipe, thin and piercingly sweet, drew the listeners' souls from their bodies. There was a perfume of musk and ambergris and roses, the gleam of night-dark eyes, of polished limbs and half-veiled bosoms.

And in Prince Dena's place a young monarch sat, ablaze with jewels and rainbow-tinted silks, who waved a languid hand to tall veiled figures that hovered behind his throne. Even as he waved, the radiant mist dispelled, the candles and lamps burned slowly and steadily again, and the bewildered company sat staring foolishly at one another's familiar faces.

"Who — who are you?" Evadne's slender hand was at her throat, as she turned to Prince Dena. Then, with an uncertain little laugh, she snatched at the conventions.

"Why, you perfectly marvelous man. That's the most wonderful illusion I've ever seen out here! You're a real sorcerer, I believe."

"The devil he is!" muttered old Doctor Hamdi, annoyed at being so completely tricked. "I beg your pardon, Mrs. Fairleigh," he apologized. "But, did you see it all, too, those delightful ... er-r-r ... houris?"

"I certainly did," answered the scandalized Mrs. Fairleigh. "You might have warned us we were to be treated to conjuring, Sir Hugh! I strongly disapprove of this sort of thing. It's quite against my principles to allow myself to be hypnotized."

"Don't blame our host," the Prince's amused voice cut in. "It was entirely unpremeditated. Merely an answer to our learned friend here." And he nodded to Hadur.

The secretary did not reply. He had begun to peel a mandarin orange, and his eyes were on his plate.

"Certainly more spectacular than the Indian rope trick" pronounced the Honorable Mrs. Gaunt, endeavoring to recapture her skepticism. "I suppose you wouldn't condescend to explain the mystery, Prince?"

"Not a question of condescension, Madam," he assured her. "It was based on rules whose existence you Westerners deny. The results of magic are obvious to your senses, but the history and derivation of magic you would class with heathen mythology and folk-lore."

The touch of fear on Lady Willett's face, the bewildered look in her eyes, gave her loveliness a lost unearthly air that made Sir Hugh long to rush to her side. Mrs. Gaunt, seeing her dazed condition, did not wait for a signal to rise, but got to her feet, commanded the rest of the woman with an

imperious gesture, and put her arm through that of her hostess, as they went from the room.

"Dear child, you've got fever! Better take some quinine at once."

"No, Mildred, not fever." Evadne's voice was low and shaken. "I think — I feel there was something quite awful behind that illusion we saw! I simply hated it."

"Darling! You're much too easily impressed by these Orientals. Wait until you've been mixed up with them ten years or so, as I have. You'll learn to take them less seriously. It was clever, very, but not really devastating."

"It was quite awful!" repeated Evadne.

"Certainly it was," Mrs. Fairleigh chimed in as they sank into low chairs in the wide stone gallery that ran round the house. "A most improper thing; these natives have no sense of decency at all."

"Well, it was a good show tonight, thanks to the Prince. I thought they'd all stay on to breakfast talking about magic, and djinnees, and suspended animation, and all the rest of it. Even little Mrs. Fairleigh got wound up."

Evadne nodded, her clear eyes still shadowed by a faint fear.

"But you were as silent as an oyster, old fellow! What got your goat tonight?"

"There must be listeners for those who talk," Hadur answered dryly.

"You weren't listening, you were sulking, you old reprobate! What was it? Did Mrs. Gaunt ride her hobby-horse about the Meccan pilgrimage? Or does the Prince belong to a tribe of your hereditary enemies?"

"As to that, he is no more my enemy than yours."

Evadne looked vaguely about her for a cigarette, and Hadur was quick to see her need. She stretched out a firm, delicately modelled little hand, and turned its palm upward to look idly at the gold lettering on the cigarette.

"By the hundredth name of Allah! exclaimed Hadur. "What mark is that?"

He took her hand in his own lean dark fingers, and bent over the soft rosy palm. A faint curious mark was printed there, silver-gray as wood ash.

"Aie!" The exclamation burst from Hadur, as if a mortal agony seized him. "Allah's mercy on us! When was this done to you?"

"Why — how very curious!" Lady Willett stared at the mark with puzzled brows.

"Did the Prince touch you? Think — remember — was it when he worked his magic at the dinner table?"

"Yes, I remember now, I felt a little tingle on my hand when the candles flared up. It was a peculiar pain, and went right through me. I looked at my hand afterward but there was no mark there. I can't feel anything now, but it won't come off — it won't come off!"

She scrubbed at her palm with a shudder of distaste, and showed the mark to Hugh, standing by her side.

"I don't know quite why you and Hadur are making such a fuss." He was tenderly scornful. "You've scraped the skin a little. Come along, I'll put plaster, and ointment, and a large bandage on it, darling, then you'll be happy."

"It is the sign of Melek Taos — the Mark of Power!" Hadur's voice was low and hoarse. "You can do nothing, Sir Hugh, for the Sitt Evadne has been chosen by the Prince to be — Wa hyat Ullah, these lips will not utter the words!"

"What do you mean, Hadur?" Sir Hugh was suddenly stern and angry. "Don't you see that you are alarming Evadne? Explain — don't stand there muttering Arabic to yourself!"

"My lord!" It was seldom, indeed, that Hadur used his native speech, and a chill of fear touched the other's heart at the profound solemnity of Hadur's voice and manner. "My lord! It is wiser to tell thee at the outset what great evil hath befallen the Sitt Evadne. It is so grave and overwhelming a disaster, that ignorance would be the last extremity of unwisdom. That mark is the mark of Melek Taos — the Angel Peacock — the symbol of that bright Prince of Evil, whose rule ended, temporarily, at the fall of Babylon."

"If I didn't know you for a strict Mohammedan, I'd say you'd been drinking," Sir Hugh interrupted, frowning. "What has Evadne to do with the fall of Babylon? What in hell — excuse me, darling — what on earth is an Angel Peacock?"

"You were right in saying hell," replied Hadur. "The Angel Peacock is the symbol for the devil, a shaitan, the ageless' evil which men have worshipped from the beginning of time."

Evadne looked with fascinated horror at her hand.

"It is getting plainer all the time," she gasped. "Look, there are wings, a head! It is a bird! More like an eagle, or a vulture, than a peacock."

Both men bent over her hand. The silvery-gray mark was deepening to a dull black, and, as Evadne turned her hand this way and that, it shimmered with gleaming opalescent hues.

"It is very beautiful — very!"

Hadur turned on her with a desperate terror.

"Beautiful! Accursed, you mean! You must not be fascinated by it. Cover it up; you must not let that mark work on you as the Prince intends."

Sir Hugh drew her to sit beside him on a divan close by, putting his own hand over the strange mark, and holding Evadne within the shelter of his arm. His instinct and training prompted him to make light of the whole thing; he did not want his wife to be frightened, and he had always made a habit of resolutely turning his back on the numerous occult phenomena which he encountered in the East. Not that he blundered by showing the natives his complete disbelief in their many superstitions, with the exception of Hadur, but he cherished the belief that nothing supernatural could, or did, exist.

Something deeper than either instinct or training stirred in him now. With a quite inexplicable hatred he hated to see that glittering mark on Evadne's hand. Some fear, ancient and primeval as the foundation of the world, began to trouble him. Over dim, unsuspected pools of memory, an old and terrible wisdom moved with portentous shadow.

"Tell us all you know, or think, or suspect," he asked Hadur.

The Arab bent his head gravely, and sat down opposite the pair.

2

"I WILL GIVE YOU THE FACTS AS I KNOW THEM," began Hadur.
"Hear me out, however incredible and repellent you find them."

His audience nodded agreement, Sir Hugh with a sinking heart.

"Prince Dena ibn Zodh is High Priest of the tribe known as the Yezidees. These people are devil-worshippers, and have been for many centuries. In the time of Shaikh Adi, their chief exponent, the Yezidees bulked largely as a terrible and dangerous sect. They have a sacred Black Book called Al Yalvah, and in the Thirteenth Century reached their zenith as a ruling, influential power of evil. Since that time their power steadily declined, but the old reputation clung to them, and Jews and Moslems and Christians alike despised and hated them."

"In reality, until quite recently, they had become a perfectly harmless peasant tribe, whose communities lie scattered in the hills northeast of Bagdad, and in other countries such as Kurdistan, Armenia, and Persia. They practised a few rites and ceremonies grown harmless and unmeaning

during the passage of time. They adhered to a few superstitions, such as never wearing the color blue, and never speaking of the devil by that name. The **Shaitan** they worship is symbolized for them in the form of a peacock. A marvellously wrought bejewelled bird represents their god to the tribe, and is kept in some secret sanctuary. When referring to their devil ruler, they call him Melek Taos, or Angel Peacock."

Evadne looked down at her hand, but her husband closed it almost fiercely within his own, and drew her closer to him.

"Melek Taos is something akin to Lucifer, only that the Yezidees think he will return in time to his celestial sphere, and that he rules this earth, meantime, by the direct command of Allah. Until recently, in spite of these strange beliefs, the Yezidees lived normally honest, decent lives. Their religion was a mere shell of the old faith, Melek Taos a focus for their instinct to worship. The old unspeakable sacrifices and horrible perversions of human attributes were completely forgotten."

"And the Prince, what has he to do with all this?" asked Sir Hugh.

"Everything! He has revived the old infamous worship in its entirety, every custom and sacrifice and obscenity of the devil-worship of the dark ages. Melek Taos, from being more angel than devil, is now utterly and wholly devilish. His worshippers indulge in every form of beast-like lust, and unnamable orgy. Torture, sacrifice, the bridal rights of the High Priest and other abominations have been fully re-established."

Hadur looked hesitatingly at the young couple, his eyes haunted and tragic. "There is worse, much worse to come," he went on. "These things are the mere trappings and superficialities of the devil-worshippers under the new regime of Prince Dena."

"Good God, man!" exclaimed Sir Hugh. "No human being could do worse than this, surely!"

"Human being? Well, yes, as far as his body of flesh and blood is concerned, he is human." Hadur spoke slowly and heavily. "But the Prince has learned a power and a control that set him as far apart from human life, thought, and experience, as a great scientist is removed from the organic life beneath his microscope, or on his dissecting-table.

"You are angry, alarmed, bewildered. It is natural; yet I beg you to remain calm while I try to make clear what will bewilder you still more. These Yezidees were disciples of the false Zoroaster in the past; their ancestors treasured remnants of knowledge and power from the days of long-forgotten kingdoms — lost in the mists of time even when the Assyrians ruled. But these remnants of power perished and were buried

beneath the stones of Babylon. The last secrets of Zoroaster vanished in the general holocaust.

"The true Zoroaster, born six thousand years before Plato, according to many savants, learned the great principles that control the universe. He, and his Magi, held the elements in the hollow of their hands. Above all things, they learned the secret and occult force that governs fire. Electricity was subject to them, and answered to their control as a horse answers to bit and bridle.

"They learned, through long discipline and terrible ordeals of purification, to liberate the will entirely from the senses, until they could hear the Very Voice of Fire, until they could focus the universal fire — the Astral Fluid that radiates from every sphere in the universe — and direct it as a weapon or a defense when they pleased.

"The Voice of Fire taught them to become seers and prophets, to impose any thought or feeling upon the multitude, to make themselves visible or invisible at will, to communicate with other Magi at the far ends of the earth."

"How?" Sir Hugh questioned harshly.

"By means of huge power-houses where the electric fluid was stored — seven great towers which stretched across the continent of Asia from Arabia to Tibet. These towers have long since crumbled into dust, but Prince Dena has erected a new one here in the hills somewhere north of this city. And I have information from those who work for me in this matter, that other towers are being built in Persia, Afghanistan, and Mongolia.

"Here, not twenty miles from Bagdad, the Prince rules with all the absolute sovereignty of the Magi of the Assyrian Empire. He has protected his Temple and Palace with the fire-mist and thunder clouds of the priests of Babylon. He has diverted the rivers which flooded and destroyed the old Yezidee altars. He has built his tower over these same altars, and there the living flame burns night and day."

"How have you learned all this? You've been with me for years, and I've never heard a word of Prince Dena. I know the Yezidees existed, but that was all. Have you seen the tower, the altar, and all the rest of it?"

"When you journeyed to Europe with the Sitt, and left me here in Bagdad, I met a man whose daughter had been sacrificed to Melek Taos by the Prince himself. I may not betray her name — it was a great one and very honored here in Bagdad. Her father has great learning and greater courage. By an accident I stumbled on his secret purpose to avenge his daughter, and since then he and I have worked together. In disguise this man has

visited the Temple, joined in the worship, and never rests now in his plans to destroy the Yezidees root and branch. But so far — "He made an eloquent gesture of despair..

"I am not quite clear about the true and the false Zoroastrians." Evadne's face was pale, but her eyes were intent and steady, her mind absorbed by Hadur's words. "And the Prince himself, is he a true Magus?"

"He was," replied Hadur. "It is that which makes him so unassailable now. He passed through all the sternest tests and ordeals. He became an Adept. He learned all the occult mysteries that control the elements. He heard the Very Voice of Fire, and only death can rob him of his power now, although he has turned it to base and unworthy uses. The Fire he controls will destroy him utterly at last, as it destroyed Sardanapalus on his throne in Babylon. Meantime — he rules!"

"I have told you all, Sitt!" Hadur met the girl's steadfast eyes. "I have told you because ignorance would expose you to greater risk. You must understand completely the kind of danger that threatens you."

"I know, I understand, Hadur."

Evadne felt her husband's hand tremble on her own, and turned to him quickly. His angry puzzled look touched her profoundly.

"Darling, don't worry! This is the Twentieth Century, and we are in Bagdad, not Babylon. I think Prince Dena is a terrible man, I felt it from the first moment we met. But he'll have a hard time to get me into his temple, with all his magic and mysteries! Don't look at me as if I were sitting in a tumbril on the way to the guillotine. Remember, we're in the East, where one expects all sorts of things to happen."

Sir Hugh's gloom visibly lightened. "You're an absolute wonder, really you are!" And Hadur's flashing glance confirmed her husband's admiration. We'll tackle this thing together, and bring Prince Dena lower than the walls of Babylon itself."

Hadur fingered a cigarette, his eyes lowered. He had failed to convince Sir Hugh, but he felt assured that Evadne's attitude was more or less assumed for her husband's benefit. She was the more intellectual of the two, more inclined to the mysticism of the East, understanding much that lay outside the range of Sir Hugh's strong practical mind, more imaginative and receptive of the older philosophies, and, if more credulous, at the same time more subtle and flexible in her thought.

Meantime he saw her glance down at her hand, and the question he dreaded followed promptly: "And the mark, Hadur?"

"It is the mark that the High Priest sets upon his chosen. You are the

woman whom he has destined to be offered to Melek Taos on the night of sacrifice, at the rising of the next new moon."

Sir Hugh rose abruptly, his anger suddenly breaking bounds. "Don't couple Evadne's name with that beastly conjurer's! It's an insult in itself, if only a quarter of what you say is true. It is my fault that she has been exposed to his presumption. I was a fool to have been taken in by him in the first place. I shall see that he never comes near her again, confound him! That mark can be removed by caustic, or electricity. I'll take her to a doctor tomorrow."

Hadur watched the couple go. Evadne's smile to him, over her shoulder, was particularly gentle and affectionate, and the Arab's eyes were dim as he watched her golden head and cloudy draperies disappear down the long corridor without.

"Allah have her in his keeping! To save her I would burn in Gehenna for a thousand years. To save her!..."

3

FOR A FEW DAYS, SIR HUGH, anxious to prevent any chance that might bring Evadne into contact with Prince Dena again, refused to go away from the city, or even to stay more than an hour or two away from his wife. But as the days passed uneventfully, the thought of his workmen in the Euphrates valley began to worry him. They had reached a critical point in a most important job, when the Tomb of Queen Bal-el-Zouka was to be uncovered. It was essential that he should superintend the opening of the inner stone chamber. Only he possessed such experience and expert knowledge as was necessary for such a delicate operation.

Hadur was on the spot, overlooking the workmen, and no doubt could carry out the final diggings as well as he could himself, unless some unexpected difficulty turned up. It was the chance of this last occurrence that worried Sir Hugh.

His strong common sense and cheerful optimism had quickly thrown off the vague alarm and suspicion he had first entertained with regard to the Prince. As the days quietly succeeded one another the Tomb of Queen Bal-el-Zouka loomed larger, as the Prince faded on his mental horizon.

"I really ought to ride up the valley, and see how things are going," he remarked at breakfast one morning.

"Of course! Why don't you go today? I shall be busy all morning. The consul and his wife are calling to take me to an exhibition of rugs at the Hotel el Kadr."

Sir Hugh's face cleared completely. "Splendid! You'll be careful though, won't you, darling? That fellow, Prince Dena, may be hanging about on the chance of seeing you. I've given strict orders that he is not to be admitted on any pretext whatever. If those two are with you today — "

"Exactly," laughed Evadne. "I hardly think even Prince Dena would tackle so formidable a team! Mrs. Lamont would die rather than acknowledge the strain of Arab blood in her, and snubs all natives impartially. And he — well, he sees people and things as she wants him to see them."

"Poor fellow, I can sympathize with him. I know exactly what he feels like!" Sir Hugh looked as dismal as his jolly face would allow. "We must get together, he and I, and talk over this wife business. Can't call my soul my own now."

"Poor old thing!"

She had accompanied him to the entrance hall as they talked, and they stood looking down at the sunlit streets. In the shadow of the deep Moorish arch she suddenly clasped him with the quick warmth that made her so adorable to him. "You are so dear and silly, Hugh. I simply couldn't live without you now — the sillier you get, the more I like you."

"That's lucky, as I'm heading in the same direction about you. Now, listen to the parting injunction of a fond but jealous spouse. If you see the Prince, cut him dead. By the way, you've still got the bandage over that mark. The doctor said you might remove it today, didn't he?"

"I think I ought to give it until tonight. It was a rather painful process having it pricked out. It may heal better if I wait a few hours longer."

In the deep shadow her sudden flush was not noticeable. She had already uncovered her hand, and seen the mark as clear and strong as ever, but meant to consult Hadur before showing it to her husband. The latter had been hanging about so miserably restless for the last week, that she wished him to go off without anxiety today.

"Poor child!" He patted the injured hand tenderly. "Well, if I'm going, I'll ride out now before the sun gets any higher. You may expect Hadur and me back tonight, without fail. He'll be surprised to see me turn up."

A last kiss, and he set off down the street to the stables, his white-clad figure very square and uncompromising amidst the flowing burnooses and rainbow hues of the native population.

Hadur was not only surprised, but passionately angry with Sir Hugh, filled with an almost murderous fury as he watched him approach the camp.

"Blind worm! Is he made of wood, or stone, that he can leave her to the mercy of that devil? Oh, by Allah, I could bind him on a wild horse

and flog him into the desert for this treachery to her! He has left her, lost her forever, the blind, dullwitted fool!"

Then in a moment his rare anger passed. He saw Sir Hugh, not as the traitor, but as the betrayed, and immense pity and sorrow filled him.

"El mektoub, mektoub!" he quoted beneath his breath. "If he must lose her, then she is already lost. Of what use to strive against one's fate? Is it not hung about our neck from the hour of our birth? We do but tread a path already ordained for our feet."

Sir Hugh looked slightly abashed as he rode up to Hadur, and busied himself with his mount for a minute, with averted eyes.

"Evadne's splendid," he presently remarked, rather jerkily. "Going off with the Lamont griffin and her husband today. I've given strict orders not to have the Prince admitted to the house. You and I will be back at sundown."

"It is well, Arfi!" Hadur led the way to the tomb without more words, and Sir Hugh followed meekly, knowing that he was in disgrace. But the feeling of guilt was swallowed up in excitement very soon, and for the remaining hours of the day he was too much absorbed to remember that such a man as Prince Dena existed at all.

The domes and minarets of Bagdad glowed redly in the setting sun as Sir Hugh, with his secretary, dismounted at the stables, and walked toward his spacious white house in the avenue of the Califfs. A servant usually sat within the entrance to question all who climbed the broad steps, and to receive messages if his master and mistress were not at home. This evening, the great arched doorway was deserted. The heavily studded door was closed.

Sir Hugh was about to give a loud rat-tat-tat with the stock of his riding-whip, when Hadur put a hand on his arm. "Something has gone wrong. Let us enter quietly, and make our own discoveries. There are other entrances."

There were several of them, and the two men found the glass door leading into the palm garden was unlatched. They walked in quietly through a conservatory of heavily scented plants, and thence into Sir Hugh's private study. A strange pall of silence seemed to fill the house almost visibly.

In the wide tilted hall they saw a figure sprawled against the marble wall. It was Ali, the doorkeeper. He was sleeping, and so soundly that nothing

would rouse him. Hadur examined him swiftly, lifting an eyelid, feeling his pulse. "Not drugged! He is hypnotized!" he pronounced.

"Prince Dena!"

Sir Hugh's face was suddenly haggard with anxiety. Hadur's did not change from the settled melancholy it had worn all day. With one accord they turned, letting the servant slip back against the wall. They mounted the great curved central stairway, and reached the western wing, through a labyrinthine maze of corridoes and passages.

They paused in the small anteroom which led to a lovely domed chamber, where silken rugs made glowing pools of color on the marble floors, and cushions and divans and rich hangings formed a background worthy of the great Haroun at Rashid himself.

The anteroom was shut off only by curtains of damask silk, and between them the two men saw something that made them stiffen and freeze like game dogs, still and motionless as statues.

On a divan opposite, across a wide space of floor, Evadne lay relaxed against a pile of gorgeous cushions. Her head shone like a golden torch in the last rays of the setting sun, her delicately cut features touched to an almost unearthly beauty.

Beside her sat Prince Dena ibn Zodh, his face in profile, like a classic bronze against the window, through which a crimson afterglow blazed. He leaned toward his companion, and the low murmur of a strange rhythmic chant reached the two behind the curtain.

Like a flower turning to the sun, the girl's face turned toward the Prince, her gray eyes wide and shining, her lips parted in delight. She swayed, smiling, closer, closer to the dark intent singer. His two hands went out to her, held the golden head cupped between them as he crooned, with a wild soft wail at the close of each verse:

O ye Red Mist! O ye swift Flame.
Melek Taos! By that bright name,
I serve thee with beauty.
Ahyahaiee! Ahyahaiee!
Dancing red Fire! Dancing white Fire!
Leap nearer! Leap higher!
Baptize this, thy bond-slave.
Ahyahaiee! Ahyahaiee!

Sir Hugh made an agonizing effort to move, to speak, to rush in and snatch Evadne to him. He could not stir a muscle. At his side, Hadur might have been carved from wood; not a tremble or a breath shook him, as he, also stood rooted to the floor.

Prince Dena bent down to the lovely face between his two hands, and his chant sank to a low mutter breathed against her parted lips:

To thy altar, Melek Taos! To thy altar, O King!
At the rising of the new moon, Melek Taos, I bring
These white limbs, this gold head in thy bright arms to lie.
Vau Jotchavah!
Vau Opharim!
Vau Ruach Addonai!

Evadne's lips touched those of the Prince, clung there, while Sir Hugh was forced to watch with bursting heart. His will, his spirit, his whole being rose up in an agony of effort. Like a great force of water breaking down a dam, with a flashing of stars in his head, and a dreadful jolt of leaping pulses, he came to life.

He gave a queer moan of fury, and leaped forward, dragging down the curtain to his feet. His hands were at Prince Dena's throat, his muscles tensed, his whole intent to batter the life out of that smiling dark face. To his bewilderment he grasped only empty air. Prince Dena stood at the window, looking out calmly; Evadne lay back among the gorgeously hued cushions, her eyes wide and vacant as a sleep-walker's.

"It is useless." Hadur's hand restrained him, his whisper was in his ear: "He is protected. You will injure yourself, but him you cannot touch!"

Sir Hugh brushed off the warning hand like an insect. "Let me alone! Let me alone! This is my job!"

Once more he hurled himself at Prince Dena, who stood with his back now to the window, his black eyes gleaming with fire. Sir Hugh felt a tingling shock that left him numb from head to foot, and he leaned heavily against the window-casing to steady his trembling limbs.

Again he flung himself upon that sleek, smiling enemy. There was a cry, a crash of broken glass, and Sir Hugh hung perilously from the window-frame, caught by a jagged edge of glass, and Hadur's strong hand about his ankle. It was an ignominious struggle to get back to safety. He stood within the room finally, panting, torn, bleeding, and with a fury that made his ears sing, and a mist clouded his eyes.

Prince Dena bowed with ironic gravity. "I have the honor to bid you farewell, Sir Hugh Willett."

He turned to Evadne.

"To our next meeting, white flower of Paradise!"

He took her hand and carried it to his lips, and in a moment had crossed the threshold of the room and vanished more swiftly than a passing breeze.

"Evadne!" cried Sir Hugh, desperately, as she rose with a sudden energy to look down from the window to the street below.

But the girl appeared completely insensitive to his cry, and to the pain and anger in his face. She stood with face pressed eagerly to an unbroken pane, and, returning finally to her seat, she sank down and gazed vacantly before her.

"Evadne!" Her husband sat down beside her, his voice rough with amazed anger. "What are you thinking of? Are you mad to let this beast kiss you, turn you into a thing of wax? Evadne, look at me! Listen, listen, Evadne!"

But the face he turned toward him, with shaking hand beneath her chin, was calm and still, the eyes brilliant, but their expression fixed and far away — the look of a traveller who gazes with deep longing on some distant land of desire, blind and deaf to all other objects in the way.

Hadur stood back in the shadow against the wall, watching Evadne closely. He looked years older than before he entered the room, a dreadful grayness about his mouth. His wise deep-set eyes were pools of brooding horror.

"Sir Hugh!" He came forward at last, and stood looking down at the young man as a father might look at a stricken child. "We came too late to save her, alas! The evil is past remedy. She will not hear your voice again. She will not see your face again. In her ears the voice of the High Priest drowns every other sound in the universe, and in her vision she sees only the bright evil spirit that has bound her to him. It has been decreed that this fate should come upon us all. It is the will of Allah!"

"Nonsense, Hadur!" The Arab fatalism had the effect, at least, of rousing the other to battle. "Why should Allah decree a thing of such awful horror? It is the result of my own carelessness. I left her—I left her! Evadne!"

His voice was softly pleading now; he took her hand between his own, stroking it, talking softly to her as if she were a wayward child. Then he and Hadur noticed the mark on her hand simultaneously, and both their faces paled.

"God!" whispered Sir Hugh.

The mark shone red as fire, brilliant, opalescent, baneful, a dark star in the dusk of that gorgeous room. And as the mark burned deeper and brighter, so did Evadne's beauty catch fire, and glow with a new unearthly radiance.

Again and again Sir Hugh tried to rouse her, only to find her in the mist

of dreams where she walked alone. It was useless. The gulf between them yawned as wide as death itself.

"I'VE ORDERED THE CAR ROUND for seven-thirty this evening. Lady Willet's maid can follow when she has finished packing the trunks. We'll take the light luggage with us. It's rather awkward about leaving the excavation work, but if you return here after seeing us off at Port Said, it will make very little difference. You'll have all those letters and contracts ready for me to sign before I go, Hadur!"

"Since your mind is made up, I will have all in readiness," replied the secretary gravely. "Won't you reconsider this decision, Sir Hugh? You are making a grave mistake, and playing into the enemy's hands by this hasty move. To travel in haste, by night, and without preparation or defense against attack is to give the Sitt Evadne into his hands."

"What defense have we, if half you suspect is true? Not that I can credit your beliefs in his magic! All I know is that she has been hypnotized by this infernal scoundrel, and that I'm going to take her where she'll be safe from the sight and sound of him."

"My dear!" Hadur reverted to his native Arabic and mode of address, when profoundly moved. "Anger and sorrow blind thee to the truth. There are means of protection if thou wert willing to submit. The width of the wide earth between the Sitt and this Magus will avail nothing. She bears the mark of the Angel Peacock on her hand, the visible sign of her inner subjugation. Until that mark fades, she belongs to the High Priest who set it upon her."

"Good Heavens, man, what more can I do to have the mark removed? If the electric needle can't touch it, what can?"

"One thing alone!" Hadur answered solemnly. "The High Priest must die. Until he does, it is useless to take refuge in flight, and it will but bring a heavier weight of evil upon us all."

The other's face clouded. "I wish I could stay and settle him myself." He patted a pocket significantly. "But when you return, I give you *carte blanche* to use my name, and draw on me for any money you need to get rid of him. If you could get the authorities on his track, let them discover this beastly sacrifice business you say he practices, it ought to be easy to get him hanged as a common murderer."

"No, no!" Hadur's eyes held despair. "Have I not said he was protected?

The Altar of Melek Taos

No human weapon, no human force can harm a Magus of his standing. He has mastered the deepest secrets of Zoroaster and it would be child's play for him to avoid the clumsy traps that the law would set for him."

"Well, what remains?"

"Fire! The Universal Agent! The Prince trod the bitter path of knowledge, passing from stage to stage until control of his senses was absolute. He has heard the Very Voice of Fire! Like the false Magi of old, he no longer practices the tests and ordeals of discipline. He is using the occult forces of nature for his own ends, not for the purpose of giving light and wisdom to the world. Only utter negation of self is his safeguard; therefore he is bound to —"

"Yes, yes! You explained that the other night. Meantime, the Prince holds all the winning cards."

"It is true. He is master as long as he controls the Universal Agent. But you have a saying, 'The mills of God grind slowly, but they grind exceedingly small.' And so it is in this matter. The Law is always the same, call it God, or Nature, or Magic — all are the same!"

"Everything you say persuades me that to protect my wife, I must act, and act at once. I can't wait for the Prince to be caught in his own toils."

"And I repeat that you have not the strength of knowledge to protect her. Prince Dena must be tricked into exposing himself to the full force of the untamable element he uses so dangerously. Fire protects him. Fire must destroy him."

"Hadur!" Sir Hugh got up, and putting his hand on the other's shoulders, looked him squarely in the face. "I trust you beyond any man I know. You have been friend and adviser to me through bad times and good, for more years than I can remember. Now, for the first time, I cannot rely on your judgment. I did not realize clearly before that I am a Westerner, and that you are of the East. I cannot follow your arguments. I must take my own way of dealing with a problem so peculiarly my own. My mind is made up. I am taking Evadne away, out of the country tonight."

With a sinking heart the secretary watched the other go off to his study.

"Allah hath permitted his eyes to be blinded, that he may not see the truth," he told himself wearily. "All haste is of the devil, and of this sudden ill-considered journey much evil will come."

The moon had a red, angry look as it climbed up that night, to peer, over the shoulder of the Mosque el Harib, at the big touring-car standing before Sir Hugh Willett's doorway. The air was heavy, the stars dim, and a breathless heat hung like a pall over the city.

Evadne stood for a moment on the top-most step, looking at the red disk

of the moon, her listed face so tranquil and exquisite, that a passing beggar drew back with a startled "Ya salaam! Of a truth, the Unbeliever hath surely drunk of the seven streams of Isfadan! By Allah, it is a beauty not of this earth!"

"Come, darling," Sir Hugh gently urged her. "I think a storm is coming up."

She did not appear to know he was speaking, but continued to watch the angry sky. A low, long mutter of thunder rolled, and she smiled faintly: "In the voice of the thunder I will speak to you, in the flash of the lightning you shall see my wrath against those who would hide you from me."

She spoke as if quoting remembered words, and Sir Hugh exchanged uneasy glances with Hadur.

Not until the three had left Bagdad a mile or so behind them, and were speeding up the long valley road, did Sir Hugh begin to feel easy in his mind. Hadur, in the back of the car with the luggage, sat anxiously watching the threatening sky.

As the road narrowed to a mere rough track between the towering hills, a sudden fury of wind tore shrieking down the defile to meet them. A curtain of utter darkness fell. The road was unfamiliar, a short cut to their destination, which friends in Bagdad had recommended. It forked to right and left at more than one point, and in spite of instructions which he endeavored to follow precisely, Sir Hugh became convinced that somewhere in the darkness he had taken the wrong turn.

He determined to drive on in the chance of reaching some village, or at least of finding some protected place where they might shelter until the approaching storm had spent itself.

Hadur voiced his own misgivings: "We seem to have missed the road. I believe we are on the way to the hills where the Yezidees have their stronghold. Can you turn, Sir Hugh? It is madness to court disaster!"

"I cannot turn in this narrow place. We must go on now."

"It is madness!" repeated Hadur. "It is the power of the High Priest that draws us on this path."

A clap of thunder, echoing and prolonged, filled the narrow valley with deafening tumult. Hadur's watchfulness increased, and he sat like a dog straining at the leash, his eyes fixed on the skyline above the hills. Sir Hugh gave his whole attention to the wheel, with a darting glance every once in a while at his wife, who sat beside him with a strange look of expectancy and hope in her eyes.

The coppery glow above the dark hills grew stronger, and lightning began

to flick in long tongues of fire from peak to peak. The car bumped and rocked over the uneven track; the occupants one moment dazzled by the dancing incandescent blaze, the next, plunged into a black sulfurous gloom.

The storm seemed to be following the line of the valley, with the car the center and focus of its fury. Hadur looked through the rear window to see a clear sky behind. Overhead the rattle and roar of thunder threatened to shake the solid hills down upon the travellers.

Sir Hugh's face was white and set, as he clung to the wheel, steering more or less by instinct in the darkness and infernal uproar. The road began to climb steeply, the hills drawing in until their jagged peaks almost touched overhead. At a heart-breaking double twist in the road, the car plunged into a shallow fissure that stretched across the way. The engine coughed, gurgled sullenly, and went dead.

The two men got out, opened the hood, and poked about anxiously to discover the damage, Hadur holding an electric torch. Nothing seemed wrong. Puzzled, Sir Hugh turned to enter the car again and examine the switchboard more carefully.

The car was empty. Evadne had vanished.

"Evadne! Evadne! Evadne!"

Sir Hugh's voice rang through the hollow-sounding place with a startled terror that the rocky walls threw back in a hundred echoes. Hadur sent the ray of his powerful torch up and down the path, but only the desolate track itself was visible. Sir Hugh ran forward, stumbling to his knees in haste, calling, running, falling, and blindly running on again.

Then a mighty burst of thunder, accompanied by a violent shaking of the earth, flung both men to the ground, and a second later the sky was split by a monstrous sheet of white fire that threatened to wipe the very earth from its appointed place and scatter its ashes amidst the stardust in the void.

For long the two lay stunned and blind and deaf, the earth rocking under them. At last Hadur crawled on hands and knees to the other's side. "Look!"

He pointed an unsteady hand to the craggy summit almost directly overhead. A great arc of light burned steadily, a rainbow of gleaming fire, and beneath it the black massive walls of a building stood humped against the sky. Nearby, a taller building loomed, whose metal domes and towers reflected the red light of the fiery arc above. A single straight gleaming tower shot up into the sky, its slender shaft quivering from base to head,

with constantly moving light waves, like dancing water beneath a brilliant moon.

"The Palace of the Yezidees, and the Temple of Melek Taos! And there — there is the Sitt Evadne!"

Still on their hands and knees, the two turned their faces toward that fiery rainbow, and on the very summit of the crags a man and woman stood plainly visible in the brilliant light.

It was Prince Dena, and with him Evadne in her white-furred wrap. Still partly stunned Sir Hugh got to his feet, wavering and unsteady, and tried to shout. His voice died in his throat and his numbed arm fell heavily to his side as he strove to signal to that small white-clad figure, poised like a bird on the dark heights above the valley.

With a roar, a cataract of rain fell like a black curtain, beating the two men to their knees again, blotting out the fiery arc, and the castle and temple, swallowing up the slender figure and the tall High Priest by her side.

In a very few minutes the path turned to an icy foaming torrent beneath the feet of the dazed watchers. It was impossible to see an inch before them, impossible to do anything save cling to some spur of rock and fight to keep their footing in that swirling rush of water.

5

DAWN found them flattened up against the overhanging precipice, soaked, chilled to the bone, and aching in every muscle. Underfoot the water was abating, though running swiftly as a river in spate down the precipitous way.

The car stood axle-deep in the yellowish flood, the fissure holding it firmly in position. Thankfully, the two men splashed to its shelter, and were soon dry-clad and enjoying hot coffee and cognac from their travelling flasks, as well as the contents of a well-stocked food basket.

The sun rose over the edge of the valley walls as they ate, and in a very short time its rays beat down in full strength into the winding defile, illuminating every crack and cranny in it.

"There it is!" exclaimed Sir Hugh, as they once more stepped out into the now rapidly diminishing water, and were examining the cliff face to find the track by which Evadne and the Prince had climbed on the previous night. "There, behind that outstanding boulder!"

They squeezed in behind a great mass of stone and found a firm, clearly defined track, which wound in wide-flung loops across the face of the rock. Barely visible from the road level, once discovered it was an obvious easy ascent.

Halting at the top, they surveyed the desolate wind-swept heights, and the massive walls of the Yezidee stronghold. In the brilliant sun the light was reflected from every dome and roof, but chiefly focused on the tall slender shaft of the Shining Tower, which rose like a pillar of fire from amidst the temple domes. Its light was not steady, but flashed and winked like that of a lighthouse signal, with a radiance that made it impossible to watch it continuously.

"It's a sort of super-heliograph," asserted Sir Hugh. "They are signaling to their brother Yezidees, no doubt. Nothing of a miraculous nature about it. The material they've used in the Tower is exceptional, I admit; I never saw anything attract the sun's ray so powerfully. On the other hand, the sun itself is a miracle out here."

Hadur made no attempt to rob his companion of the comfort of this logical explanation of the wonder before them. He knew that the light-rays from that infernal Tower drew their power from every shining star and planet in the universe, and that they sent out a force that touched people and events as far removed as the poles. The Universal Agent was concentrated and focused here, gathered up by means of the Tower into a vast storehouse, in the identical manner in which the true disciples of Zoroaster had learned to gather and store it thousands of years ago.

For good or evil, a blind terrific force was harnessed here to earth, and the thought of it in the hands of Prince Dena made Hadur shudder to the soul.

"Those fellows by the gate are watching us. We'd better try to gain admittance there."

Sir Hugh walked resolutely forward as he spoke, and for the hundredth time his secretary admired the courage and resolution which were such marked characteristics of this unimaginative man.

"We seek an audience with the Prince ibn Zodh," Sir Hugh addressed one of the wooden-faced guards. The latter looked rather like two figures from a child's Noah's Ark, as they stood in their long straight black tunics and tightly bound red turbans. Both guards shook their heads solemnly and gazed past the two visitors to the parched heights beyond.

"We would speak with the High Priest. In the name of Melek Taos, we crave admittance." Hadur's tone was commanding.

The faces of the two guards instantly altered to alert wariness.

"The password," they said in unison.

"Phlagus, Schiekron, and Aclahayr, genii of the fourth Hour," replied Hadur.

The two guards saluted humbly, and stood aside.

"Enter, Masters of the House! The way lies open."

Silencing Sir Hugh with a warning look, Hadur led the way into a great courtyard, murmuring as they left the guards behind, "Leave it to me now. I have learned enough to get us inside the palace. After that — "

The courtyard was a rectangular enclosure, its towering walls shutting out every gleam of sun. A single low squat doorway broke the dark polished surfaces that closed them in, over which a figure stood out in bas-relief — the figure of a bird, from whose head bright darting flames shot upward. It was a replica of the winged bird which Evadne bore on her hand, and Sir Hugh recognized it with a shudder of disgust.

Two more guards stood here and challenged Hadur promptly.

"The Black Sword of Gaffarel, Watcher in the House of Mercury," he replied.

"Pass, Magi, diviners of the Great Mystery."

Sir Hugh followed his secretary with a rising anger. He loathed all this mummetry, the darkness, the half-seen kabalistic lettering on the walls, the exchange of meaningless words at every entrance door, the air of mystery that the unusual surroundings provoked. He realized that his mind was succumbing, despite his will, to a sense of fear and foreboding, and his sturdy common sense rebelled at such impositions on it.

Hadur turned to see the impatient anger in his eyes.

"Remember," he warned in a whisper, "the Sitt Evadne is helpless here; we are all she has to help her now. Do not let your anger betray you."

From one vaulted chamber to another they passed; at each came the challenge and Hadur's quietly assured answer to it. The winged bird met their eyes on every hand, in some form or another — on the robes of the sphinx-like guards; in flaming iridescent colors on the dull smooth blackness of the walls; in the form of hanging lamps in which dancing flames moved ceaselessly in the gloom; or poised over altars on which long tongues of fire writhed like serpents in the shadow of deep-cut archways.

"It's getting infernally hot," muttered Sir Hugh, as they penetrated still further into the interior of the great palace. "And is it my imagination, or do you hear that strange hissing sound? It's been getting steadily louder and louder."

"We are close to the audience chamber, from what my friend told me.

This is the hour for the Ritual Dance, and you'll understand the heat and the sound in a few minutes."

The noise increased to a humming roar as they passed another entrance. Hadur, under pretense of stooping to admire an immense glittering presentment of Melek Taos wrought in crystal and holding a great ball of fire in its beak, spoke rapidly to his companion.

"The Prince will bait us. Be prepared to hear and see anything — anything! But keep silent, watch closely, and do not be betrayed into passion."

At the last doorway no guards stood, but across the threshold hung a moving curtain of fire and cloud. Hadur walked straight forward, and Sir Hugh, wrought up to a pitch when he would have taken pleasure in engaging a grizzly bear to single combat, flung himself across the fire-mist without a pause.

A loud purring hum of fire greeted them, and in the first moment they thought the vaulted room in which they stood was going up in flames. As their eyes grew accustomed to the glare, they saw that the tall branching pillars of fire that swept across the length and breadth of the vast room did not touch the gleaming inlaid floor, but played in the air in a sort of fantastic weaving dance.

As they saw the meaning and purpose of the fire, they drew back in sick incredulous horror.

Between the tall flames, like moths blown by a sirocco, a nude capering crowd ran frantically to and fro, striving with unearthly yells to escape the torture of the licking flames; gaunt, deformed, inhuman objects, scarred and withered to the bone. They were the ceremonial dancers, preserved from death by the magic of the very power which tormented them.

"She is there — the Sitt Evadne!"

Hadur, more prepared for the unparalleled horrors of the Prince's stronghold, pointed to a massive platform against the wall to their right.

Sir Hugh turned to see her seated beside the High Priest, her eyes fixed in a blank stare on the capering figures below her. Vainly he looked for some means of reaching her, but the platform was high and smoothly polished to its base, and no steps led to it from the floor.

"Evadne!" he called, standing directly beneath her. "Evadne!"

The love and despair in his voice would have summoned her from the last dim portals of death itself. It summoned her now. She stood up, her eyes grave and intent. "Who calls me?" Her words came softly perplexed. "Oh — who calls?"

Sir Hugh's very soul stood in his eyes as he looked up into her bewildered

face. "Evadne, darling! It is Hugh! Hugh, your husband! Come back to me, Evadne, come back to me!"

The frozen bewilderment broke up, her eyes met his with a sudden tragic awareness. "Hugh! Hugh, save me! Something . . . holds me! Hugh . . . my darling!"

Prince Dena rose and put a hand on her arm. Instantly all the quick color faded from her face, and she turned with the old dreaming adoration to the Prince. "We welcome you to our palace, Sir Hugh Willett!" The High Priest bowed mockingly, Evadne's hand clasped in his own. "Tonight we celebrate my union with this woman whom Melek Taos has seen fit to bestow on me, his devoted servant. Never has it been my lot to hold such golden loveliness in my arms before."

Sir Hugh strove to speak, to move, to curse that smiling, wonderfully chiselled face that looked down upon him. The roaring increased in his ears, the bright flames seemed to dance toward him. Then, at a sign from their master, they receded suddenly like a tide ebbing, and the taunting voice of his enemy came clear through the mist and confusion.

"Not yet, not yet, my servants! He shall join in our Feast tonight. He shall watch me woo this golden loveliness from his embrace. He shall witness the sacrifice at the rising of the new moon, and stand helpless, O Melek Taos, when thou dost stoop from they heaven to the Altar! Stoop to thy victim — the perfect sacrifice which I will give thee at the rising of the moon!"

The tide of fire rolled back, sweeping with it those agonized shrieking figures — back · back, with an ever-diminishing hum and crackle, until the vast hall stood empty. The two on the platform vanished also, leaving Sir Hugh shaking in every limb, leaning on Hadur with eyes staring wildly at the deserted thrones of ebony above him.

"Gone! With him — with him!"

Suddenly he made a dash to the arched doorway by which he had entered, but as he neared the fire-mist, a flame shot out and curled about him like a serpent, scorching and blackening his face and hands.

Staggering back, he looked around the great empty hall and discovered other archways set in every wall between broad pillars, on which the signs of the zodiac gleamed in red and gold. No doors barred these open arches, no guards stood before them, no curtain of fire and cloud hung over them.

Yet Sir Hugh could not pass them.

Blind with grief and rage, reckless as a wounded jungle beast, he assaulted each empty threshold in turn. From each he was hurled back by some

violent force that sent him reeling and spinning across the floor, only to rise and dash blindly at another entrance.

Hadur watched him with tears. At last, his brief madness of despair over, and convinced that he was indeed a prisoner, he turned to the faithful Arab and sat down beside him with his head between his hands.

"Arfi! All is not yet lost. Do not give way to utter despair while the Sitt Evadne is still safe. Allah is merciful, and may even yet restore her to thee."

"Evadne safe? With him?"

"Safe until the rising of the moon," declared Hadur. "That much I have learned from the father whose daughter was a Bride of Melek Taos."

"Safe? — with that hell-fiend all the long hours of this day?"

"Arfi, I swear by Allah, and by the life of this body, that the High Priest will not touch her until tonight. He dares not! There are laws even a false Magus may not break, unless he desires instant annihilation. For many days before the sacrifice the High Priest must prepare himself, and abstain from many things. The lips of the destined Bride are one of these things taboo. Until tonight she is safe."

The other merely groaned.

"It is the truth," repeated Hadur. "The High Priest may not drink of his cup of love until the destined hour. It is a ceremony of mystic union in which the Angel Peacock shares. Even Prince Dena dare not insult his god!"

Sir Hugh bowed his head to his hands again, and Hadur's eyes mirrored his own agony, as he stared bleakly before him.

"Ya habib!" he murmured under his breath. "Ah, my beloved! Cursed be he who hath set this darkness in thy path! May the devils he serves rend his soul from his body, and send it shrieking down to hell. Wa Hyat rukbaty, I will follow him to the deepest pit of Gehenna, if he brings that youth and beauty to the dust. Allah be my witness! Allah hear me! Give strength to thy servant! Hear me, hear me, thou just and compassionate One!"

He sat very still, striving to master the tide of love and agony that overwhelmed him, striving to find a gleam of hope in the darkness.

AS SARDANAPALUS, KING OF BABYLON, had feasted with his Magi, and women, and favorites, and all the sycophants of a fabulously wealthy

court, so did the Prince Dena ibn Zodh, in his black and scarlet robes of ceremony, sit with Evadne at his side on the night of sacrifice.

Wild beasts, controlled by the magnetic power of the Magi, rolled in luxurious ease on silken rugs; the great tables gleamed with jewelled goblets and golden dishes; a thousand instruments mingled with the clamor of a thousand tongues; waves of intoxicating perfumes were wafted up from vaults beneath the palace; myriads of lamps winked and blazed from roof and walls and pillars. At intervals a dancer would float out on to the great white marble circle of floor, round which the tables were grouped, veiled only in her cloud of hair, and moving like a blown leaf before the wind would draw an outburst of applause that set the great beasts roaring until the domed hall rang.

Vast, sinister, marvellous as the dreams of a hashish-eater, the long orgy at last drew to an end. The revellers lay back amidst their cushions, while Prince Dena rose from his place and led Evadne to the center of the enclosed circle.

He held up a hand, and silence fell over the entire multitude of feasters; not even a beast but seemed suddenly turned to a lifeless statue.

Sir Hugh Willett and Hadur, who had sat watchful and silent during the long revel, eating only enough to give them strength, and drinking no wine, looked up with tightening nerves as the destined Bride stood facing the vast assembly.

A single garment of marvellously wrought gold tissue outlined her lovely slenderness. Her shining head was bound with a richly jewelled circlet of gold, and over her eyes its clasp glittered bright and evil in the myriads of lamps. So brilliant were the gems that formed this clasp that it had all the effect of a living flame, and Sir Hugh shuddered as he saw the hateful familiar symbol of Melek Taos flash, and flash again above Evadne's dreaming misted eyes.

"The Hour is at hand!" The High Priest's ringing tones pierced even the wine-sodden senses of the revellers. "This is my Hour, my Hour of love, my Hour of fulfillment, the Hour of mystic communion with Melek Taos, when he in me, and I in him, rejoice in the Bride!"

"Follow!" he continued, turning his burning gaze around the entire circle. "Follow, that you may worship at the great altar of Melek Taos, that you may see the Angel Peacock descend in living Fire—awful, transcendent, inexplicable! Follow! The Hour is come!"

"Not yet, not yet!" whispered Hadur in anguished appeal, as his companion gathered himself up for attack. "You may destroy her body and soul if you strike too soon. It must be done before the altar."

But, crazed with the torture of long imaginings, Sir Hugh was deaf to Hadur's pleading. He snatched up a long curved knife from a table and rushed across the marble floor with a swift silent ferocity that came within an ace of success. A black panther, however, lolling at ease within that circle, saw the flying figure and sprang like an arrow from a mighty bow. Man and beast together rolled at the feet of the High Priest, gleaming fang and gleaming knife matched in a death struggle.

The High Priest smiled. Evadne stared with a heart-breaking blankness in her eyes. The revellers stood up, cheering and laughing. The other beasts drew near, their heads flattened, their tails switching slowly. There was a fierce prolonged snarl, a choking cough, and the panther suddenly lay very still, a pool of blood spreading over the white marble floor.

Sir Hugh staggered to his feet, and advanced, with his dripping knife still clasped in one shaking hand, his eyes on his dreaming, spellbound wife. The High Priest smiled again, stretching out one jewelled forefinger toward the dishevelled figure.

Instantly the lamp-flames, from end to end of that vast room, flared up to the very roof; a peal of thunder shook the crystal goblets and golden dishes from the tables; the beasts cowered in abject terror; and Sir Hugh, as if struck by some terrible force, was sent hurtling and crashing across the floor to Hadur's side, where he lay limp as a half-emptied sack of meal.

With loud drunken laughter, the feasters turned to follow Prince Dena, in his black and scarlet robes, with a five-pointed star — the Seal of Solomon — fastened in the silken folds of his turban, and the symbol of Melek Taos in rubies on his breast.

Hadur half carried, half dragged the semi-conscious Sir Hugh after the laughing, intoxicated crowd. Down endless corridors and flights of steps they went, until they reached the great vaulted chambers beneath the palace; and thence a subterranean passage cut from the solid rock led to the immense vaults beneath the temple. From one cave-like chamber to another the High Priest led the silent, lovely Bride.

The cooler air revived Sir Hugh. He leaned less heavily on Hadur, and breathed more easily. "Where is she? Where is she?" he asked hoarsely.

"There, walking ahead of us!"

The Prince was leading Evadne up a long flight of steps, the crowd at their heels. Hadur and Sir Hugh, now almost himself again, began to push through the drunken, indifferent mob. They were not far from the leaders of it, when a brilliant light broke up the vaulted darkness, and Hardur whispered:

"The Red Altar of Melek Taos!"

They had arrived at the top of the steps, where a row of huge squat pillars stood outlined against a crimson glare from within. The two passed between the pillars and found themselves in a colossal underground chapel, whose walls and floor and roof gleamed in brilliant fiery scarlet. After the long dark passages, with their few lamps, it was some minutes before they could get a clear impression of their surroundings.

Pillars ran along three sides of the chapel, with torches fastened to them. In the fourth wall an immense shrine was hollowed out, running deeply back, and sunk in a semi-circular basin below the level of the floor. In the center of the shrine stood a figure of some insoluble glittering metal, half man, half bird, its head crowned, its wings outspread and curved before its body; its hands and arms were human, its legs scaled and ending in monstrous claws.

From the hollowed base, on every side of the figure, rose luminous, blue-tipped Fire. With the roar of many waters, the incandescent sheets of flame stretched up to lick the lofty roof. It burned with the burn and fierce song of ageless strength and mystery — unapproachable, irresistible, unconquerable Fire!

The Prince looked at the Bride he had brought to the sacrifice — the proud, shining head, the marvellous tender beauty of eyes and molded lips, the slender matchless symmetry of limbs and body, but above all the spark in her of that divine fire that did not fail or die before the source of its inspiration. Never before had the High Priest brought a Bride to the Altar of Melek Taos without seeing her beauty dwindle and become as insignificant as that of a mere painted doll.

His breath quickened. He watched her, fascinated, unbelieving, incredulous that any woman could stand in the terrible brilliance of that borrowed Fire from heaven and draw from it an added glory to herself. He stepped back to watch her, to engrave on his memory the image of this perfect Bride, before he broke the lovely mold and offered it here on the great Altar.

The roysterer mob was awed by the sublime spectacle before them. They drew back toward the walls, back from that unleashed quivering force, the naked pure element from which all life sprang, and to which all life must finally return. They blinked afraid, ashamed, knowing themselves for beasts, and less than beasts, before that clean and living flame.

Evadne stood silent and enthralled by the edge of the fountain of Fire. By her side Prince Dena waited, enthralled also by the unexpected sublimity of this Hour of Love, the radiant figure of the golden Bride

appearing as the very spirit of the Fire itself. A passion of desire rose in him, as swift, as fierce, as all-devouring as the lightnings that he gathered in the hollow of his hand.

For the first time he regretted the exigences of his office as High Priest, and the necessity of yielding up that fair and lovely body to the fiery embrace of Melek Taos after his one brief Hour of love.

He made an impatient gesture to his Magi, as a sign that they should perform their usual duties. They made the seven-fold obeisance, and moved about the chapel to extinguish the torches and spread a thick carpet of crimson rose petals before the Altar. The Prince stood with eyes on Evadne, oblivious to the rest.

Sir Hugh and Hadur edged nearer and nearer to the Altar. No one prevented them, or noticed them at all, and they bided their time watchfully. Hadur whispered low and earnestly to his companion, under cover of the deep humming song of the Fire, and the latter listened with a faint gleam of hope in his eyes. He did not understand the full extent of the plan suggested, he did not realize what Hadur's role was to be. Nor did Hadur mean him to understand.

To save Evadne was the one thought that dominated them both. Sir Hugh was in no state of mind to worry about details. There seemed a last chance – he would take it!

Prince Dena advanced to the Altar, leading Evadne by the hand, and standing before the fire-encircled image of Melek Taos, he cried: "O Master, behold the Bride!"

The Fire sank down to the floor at his clarion call, seeming to abase itself at the feet of the great Magus who could command it.

O mighty One! O Melek Taos! O Ruler of Earth!
Bend from thy throne to accept this sacrifice.
In mystic communion do thou live in me, as I in thee!
The Hour is mine! The Hour is thine!
The Joy is mine! The Joy is thine!
Be that which thou art, and thou shalt be!
Cover me with the splendor of Eloim and Ischim!

At the last word the Fire sprang fiercer and brighter than before. The hum of the flames became a triumphant song.

The High Priest turned his back to the Altar and faced the people. "Open

the doors, O Magi! And ye, worshippers at the shrine, depart and leave me my Hour! When that is passed" — the voice of Prince Dena sank to its deepest note, his burning eyes veiled for a moment by their heavy lids — "then ye shall return to witness the sacrifice. In the name of Melek Taos, I bid thee go."

Hadur and Sir Hugh were not very close to the Altar. They stood tensed in every muscle, while the crowd about them streamed toward the open doors.

The High Priest stood with eyes on Evadne, enchanted, utterly oblivious to all else. He took one step toward her. It was his last.

He never knew who seized him in arms of steel, hurling him back to that sea of living flame, over the edge of the sunken Altar, into the heart of the singing incandescent Fire!

A long shivering moan rose from the people, as Hadur, with Prince Dena in his arms, rolled over into the triumphant leaping flames. For a brief moment a blinding glare filled the cavernous chapel to its fathermost corner as the Fire curled and roared over its two victims, turning them to mere blackened shells in a few awful moments. Total darkness followed. Not a flicker, not a vestige of the Altar Fire lit the gloom.

Stumbling forward with a great cry, Sir Hugh found Evadne clinging to him, crying, trembling, broken, helpless as a child. Taking her in his arms, he staggered on blindly. Cries and groans sounded on every hand.

How he found the entrance he never knew, but he reached it at last, and followed the subterranean passages, where not one single lamp gleamed now, until a draft of fresher air guided him to a door opening on the courtyard of the Palace.

The place was desolate and silent. The guards, on this night of feasting, lay in drunken sleep across the threshold of the gates.

Down the cliff path the fugitives stumbled, and found the car still standing in the valley. To his intense relief and surprise, Sir Hugh found it answered to his touch, and they reached Port Said safely a few days later.

They never returned to the East. Evadne's vague memories, and Sir Hugh's vivid ones, as well as their sorrow for Hadur's death, robbed the Orient of all its color and romance for both of them, forever.



THE CHENOO

by Stephen Goldin

(author of *Bride of the Wind*, *For Services Rendered*, etc.)

STEPHEN GOLDIN is in the happy position of not having to write for a living, so that he can spend as much time as he likes in research into the less-traveled byways of myth and legend (so far as story writers are concerned) until he comes upon something which looks fascinating enough, and different enough to use in his "Shop" (or, as he thinks of it, "Angel in Black") series. It is intentional, not inadvertent, that we are not given the name of the narrator of those stories, and in a recent discussion with the author, I learned that it is not certain whether the "I" of this series of stories is really a human being at all. Humanoid, he must be, from internal evidence—but I confess that the non-human possibility had not occurred to me. In any event, the first two stories in the series gained your approval, and I trust that this new tale about a cold demon (opposite of heat demon, not a demon suffering from cold) will sustain your initial response. Any of you ever hear of a "chenoo" before? It was new to me; and when Mr. Goldin gets back from Germany (he'll be back, of course, by the time you read this), I'm going to invite him to write a letter for the readers' department, telling a little more about the mythical background of his stories.

IT WAS IN HALIFAX that a man came into the Shop. I use the word "man" advisedly, for he was actually on the threshold from boyhood. I guessed him to be between eighteen and twenty. He had straight black hair that fell over his forehead into his eyes. His skin had a reddish cast to it, indicating that he was of Indian origin. His nose was straight, his body lean and well-muscled, but his eyes were still those of immaturity.

"May I help you?" I asked politely.

"They...they told me to come to you," he said. He spoke English with a

weird Algonquian accent that immediately placed him as a member of the Micmac tribe.

"Who are 'they'?"

"The tribal elders. They say it's all my fault, but I didn't know any better, honest. How could they expect me to really believe..."

"Perhaps you should start at the beginning. I'm scarcely omniscient, you know."

"Sorry." He paused for a moment to regain his breath after his hysterical outburst. "I come from a village outside of Pictou. A long time ago, one of my ancestors was the medicine man for our tribe. At that time, there was a Chenoo who was marauding our village, killing women and solitary hunters in the woods. But my ancestor was apparently a man of pretty strong magic. He couldn't kill the Chenoo, but he did have enough power to imprison it within a small pot, which he lidded and said spells over so that the Chenoo could not escape. That pot has been kept by my family ever since, as a sort of a trust. Until me. I didn't believe in the demons that the elders spoke of. I said it was mystical rubbish. And just to prove my point, I took down this old pot and threw it on the ground, shattering it."

I winced at what I knew would be the inevitable result of freeing a demon so long imprisoned.

"There was a whirlwind of air, as if a hurricane had struck," he continued. "My...my baby sister got in its way and it...it killed her. Then it took off into the forest, leaving a trail of debris behind it."

"I assume, then, that you want me to find it and destroy it."

"Yes, please. I'll pay anything you ask. They all say it's my fault, that I'm to blame. But how was I to know? It all sounded so unbelievable..."

He went on with his protestations of innocence, but I paid him little attention. I was too busy considering strategy. The Chenoo is one of the most dangerous of demons, for it can kill in a variety of unpleasant ways. It is also fast, and a single hunter, unaided, will never be able to catch it. I would need help in this job, but I felt I knew where I could get it.

"You say you will pay whatever I ask," I interrupted my client. "I knew this already, for otherwise you would not have been able to walk through the door. I assure you, my fees are always fair, though they often odd to the uninitiated. Be warned."

I turned and considered the shelves that line the walls of the Shop, looking for equipment that would prove useful to me in the coming venture. My short-sword came immediately to hand, and I tucked it neatly away inside my belt for the time being. Next, I chose a pair of specially

prepared earplugs and a small vial of salamander oil. After another moment's thought, I took down a small black pot and tied the handle to my waist with a special red string.

"All right," I told my client, "I'm ready. Let's go."

There followed a train ride of several hours, for Pictou is about a hundred and sixty kilometers from Halifax. At Pictou, we found a couple of horses waiting for us, and we rode straight into the Indian village.

It was a small settlement of scarcely a hundred people who seemed to cling as much as possible to the old tribal ways despite the inroads made by the modern world. Conical wigwams were the rule, though wooden huts could be seen scattered about. I suspected that the people still caught most of their own food—the Micmacs were always expert hunters and canoe-men, and several handmade canoes showed signs of recent usage.

As we rode in, we attracted many stares of polite curiosity—or at least, I did. I always do. Children, in particular, find me fascinating. I've learned to ignore the attention.

We went directly to the wigwam of the medicine man. Inside, the tribal elders awaited us, seated in a circle on the floor. There was the sour taste of tension in the air, as well as hostility. But the anger was directed at the boy, not at me. I could understand, in part, the reason. It had been he who had brought all this trouble into the village by scorning the elders' advice on supernatural matters; indirectly, he was responsible for the death of his sister. And, too, there was the usual hatred of youth by the aged, jealousy for possession of something lost to them beyond redemption.

I ignored these emotional undercurrents. A place had been readied for me. I sat down on the smoothed earth in the center of the circle of elders and made my preparation to leave my body and journey into the second sphere. I gripped the earplugs firmly in my right hand, and checked to be sure that the short-sword, pot, and the vial of salamander oil were strapped to my waist. I fingered the Angel in Black that hung about my neck. "Under no circumstances," I said, "is this pendant to leave my body while I am in the second sphere. Is that understood?"

The elders nodded solemnly.

I lay back and relaxed all the muscles of my body. At first my breaths were deep, then they became shallower as my body demanded less oxygen. I turned my mind inward and concentrated on the familiar silent ritual for the parting of soul and body.

There was a tremendous wrenching of my mind, and I was free..Free of the cumbersome weight and limitations of my earthly parts. No matter

how often I perform this act, it is new each time. I must take a moment to look around me and assuage the frightened part of my mind that all is as it should be.

I shielded my eyes, for a moment, from the bright white light of the second sphere. When my pupils had adapted to the new illumination, I looked around. Dim shapes moved around me, the elders and my client—their bodies threw obscure shadows into the second sphere. My own body, too, lay on the ground, but I was not concerned with it at present. I stood up and walked out of the tent.

The Chenoo's scent was still upon the air in the village, faint but unmistakable. The breeze wafted it from the woods that lay to the north and west of the village, and I knew it was there that my hunt would lead me. Resolutely, I walked toward the trees.

My first need was to acquire some allies. I doubted my ability to catch the Chenoo by myself, though I was sure I could destroy him once I had captured him. I needed someone with a knowledge of these woods, an ability to be nearly everywhere at once, and loyalty. Or rather, several people like this.

I walked through the woods. The trees were mostly balsam and fir, with a few red spruce daring to intrude here and there among their cousins. I caught fleeting glimpses of the shadows cast by mortal animals that dwelt here—deer shyly running from me, sniffing my presence even through the curtain that separates the first and second spheres. Raccoons lumbered by, and red squirrels raced up and down the trees sides with almost careless abandon. I thought I spied a moose once, but it is difficult to tell with the shadowy forms the way they were.

I arrived at a clearing and sat down, cross-legged, on a spot of bare ground. I put my palms downward on the ground and closed my eyes. I began to chant.

*"Come to me, O Wigguladum-moochkik,
Very little people, hear my call.
Come to a traveler who needs your aid.
I wish a conference with you; come."*

When I opened my eyes, I was surrounded by pixies. They averaged about three feet in height, and they all wore clothing of green and brown, the earth colors. All had white beards of varying lengths, and had little brown caps upon their heads. One of them stepped forward, probably the leader, for his beard was the longest in the group.

"Why did you summon us? he demanded.

"I have come to request the assistance of the very little people in a hazardous undertaking," I replied somberly.

"We do not perform services for all who ask."

"I know that. I am prepared to pay for your help."

"What do you offer us?"

"What do you need?"

The leader pondered this a moment, then turned back to his compatriots. There was a long conference among the Wigguladum-mochkik, quiet but emphatic. They were having trouble making up their minds.

At last, the leader turned back to me. "We are currently having problems with the dragon Cheepichealm, who has taken a fancy, of late, to swooping down on any of us who are out late at night and devouring them."

"How is Cheepichealm able to find you at night?" I asked. "Dragons are not known for their sharp-sightedness."

"Nor for their sense of smell," the leader agreed. "Cheepichealm detects us by the sounds we make: our talk, our footsteps, our very breathing. Can you work a spell that would rob him of his hearing, at least in part, so that we might be able to come and go in peace?"

It was my turn to ponder. I know of several spells that can product deafness in an enemy. The only problem was that I had no ingredients at hand to work with. I tried to recall whether I had the proper materials back at the Shop, but I couldn't be certain—the inventory of the Shop varies quite considerably from moment to moment. "I'm not sure," I said. "I know the spells, but I lack the ingredients at present. Would you be willing to perform your work for me now in return for my help later?"

Another conference. "While we do not wish to doubt your word, our need is urgent. We must find security from these constant attacks."

Stalemate.

"All right," I said. "I will help you against Cheepichealm. I might not be able to product deafness, but I will incapacitate him in some way."

"That is not an easy matter," the leader warned me. "He is immortal, you know, so that no physical force will avail you. Otherwise, we would have handled the problem ourselves."

"I know this," I said. "But I have many means at my disposal other than purely physical. I have traveled widely among the spheres, and I have gained much knowledge in my wanderings. Something, I am sure, will

come to mind. But you must promise me that you will help me first, before I help you."

"No. Our need is more pressing."

I hate to haggle; it's such a waste of valuable time. "My own task," I said, "is the elimination of a Chenoo that has been loosed after many years' captivity. He is even now wandering these woods in search of food and vengeance. Is this not of more concern than the occasional maraudings of a dragon?"

Once again, the Wigguladum-moochkik conferred among themselves. I have noticed, over the years, that pixies have a group mentality; they are loathe to act without the approval of their fellows. Nothing is quite so lonely as a pixie cut off from his brethren. They are a lively breed when taken all together, but rather dull when considered as individuals.

"You are right." was their final decision. "An angered Chenoo is a far greater threat than Cheepichealm at present. We will help you now, on the condition that you help us with our problem as soon as your task is completed."

"Agreed," I said. "Now here is what I want you to do..."

I was moving again through the woods. My bare feet touched lightly on the thin layer of snow that had fallen. I moved north and west, only partially concentrating on the way ahead of me. Among the silent, stately trees, I could not help but reflect on Mr. Frost's poem. I do indeed have miles to go before I sleep—many miles, and ugly. Every moment of peaceful beauty I find, therefore, I grab and cherish within me.

A shadow moved where none should have been. It was not the Chenoo, or I would have sensed it before this. Nevertheless, the second sphere abounds in dangers for the unwary. My muscles tensed. "Make yourself known, whoever you are," I called, my hand resting loosely on the hilt of my short-sword.

It was my client who stepped out of hiding. He carried a bow, and had a quiver filled with arrows strapped to his back. His young face was blanketed in bewilderment and fear.

"What are you doing here?" I asked him angrily. It is not right for mortals to go blundering into the second sphere when they have no knowledge of it, and this boy was as ignorant as a child in that department. "Don't you know how dangerous it is here?"

"They...that is, the medicine man and the elders...they thought you might need some help, and...and since it was my fault..."

"They sent you along to help me," I finished for him. More than likely,

they sent him along to teach him a lesson. Tribal elders are a stern group, wherever in the world you find them. They are firm believers in making the punishment fit the crime, no matter how inadvertent the crime, no matter how severe the punishment. They would drown an infant that wet its breeches once too often.

He nodded. "Do they know how to get you back?" I asked next. There are various ways of entering the second sphere. Death is the way most people find. There are others, less obvious. But far harder than getting there is the problem of returning.

This time he only shrugged. "I don't know. They rushed me into it pretty quickly."

So here I was, with a boy ignorant of magical skills and frightened nearly out of his wits, in a place that was treacherous at best, hunting a prey that was currently as desperate as it was dangerous. I had no way of knowing whether I would be able to extricate the lad from the second sphere once the task was done—assuming, of course, that he would be in any condition for revival. These "well-meaning" elders had complicated my job immeasurably, and I intended to have a goodly number of harsh words with them when I returned.

But for the moment, I had more practical matters to consider. "Do you know how to use that thing?" I asked, indicating the bow.

"I have passed my tests of manhood," he said proudly, "and I have never returned from a hunt empty-handed."

Well, that was something. The bow could be quite a handy addition to the hunt, used properly. "Give me your quiver," I said.

He did so, puzzled. I spread his arrows out on the ground and muttered a short spell over them. "Ordinary arrows will never be able to penetrate a Chenoo's skin," I explained. "The spells I have used will strengthen these." And I gave them back to him.

The next problem was much harder, and much more serious. The boy needed protection from the Chenoo before we could continue with the hunt. I had the Angel in Black and the earplugs to protect me; he had no charms at all. Quickly, I listed some ingredients that I wanted him to find, without telling him what they were for. While he went off looking for them, I took the pot from off my waist, filled it with water, and built a fire under it. It was bubbling well by the time he got back.

"Some of those things were awfully hard to find in this snow," he said. "I couldn't get as much as you wanted." I looked at what he had gotten—it would be enough to prepare one earplug, but not two. Again I

muttered a few silent curses against those elders. But one earplug would be better than none at all, and perhaps even that would not be necessary.

I dropped a pebble of about the right size into the pot, then, one by one, I added the necessary ingredients. During the entire procedure, I kept up a mystic chant in a language so old that all meanings of its words have been lost; one can only repeat the words and hope for the best. But the spell always works, for the words are Words of Power.

When I was done, I gave the pebble to my unwanted companion. "Which ear do you hear best with?" I asked him.

"My right," he replied with some hesitation.

"Then put this in your right ear." He did so. I put my face close to the right side of his head and yelled as loud as I could.

"It deafens that whole ear," he said with wonder. "I couldn't hear a thing on that side."

"You should really have a set of them," I told him. "When we come close to the Chenoo, put that in your right ear and secure it tightly. And hope that it's not necessary at all." And we set out again on the trail of the Chenoo.

After a timeless interval—for time is irrelevant in the second sphere—we picked up the demon's spoor. The Chenoo, in his angry flight from the village, had cut a path ten feet wide through the foliage, invisible in the normal world but plain enough in this sphere: tree branches, quick-frozen by mere proximity to the cold demon's body; the souls of animals frosted over in the wake of the monster's passage; and everywhere along the path was a silence so loud it made our heads throb.

The boy beside me was trembling as we walked the trail, but not once did he utter a word of fear. We moved quietly, without speaking, watching for some sign of our quarry. The pot thumped evenly against my thigh from the rhythm of my walking. My right hand stayed close to my short-sword as I marched along.

Things began happening almost all at once. The stillness lay thicker than a winter blanket. Nothing moved. I sensed a presence...and a large shape moved quickly through the trees ahead of us. "There!" I shouted to my companion and pointed at the fleeing figure.

We took after it at top speed. Crashing sounds reached our ears as the Chenoo raced through the underbrush making no attempt to disguise his path. He was naturally faster than we were, and he started pulling ahead. I made a guess at his thought processes. Since he was faster, he could choose where the chase would run. A crowded forest was to our advantage rather

than his, since the trees would hinder the movement of his much larger body. Consequently, he would try to lead us to a place where his size could be used to greater advantage—a clearing of some sort. Once there, he would turn and fight his two would-be destroyers.

Through the forest we sped in pursuit of the ice demon. The boy matched me stride for stride—not an easy feat. He was puffing and tired, but determined to go through it all with me. I began to think of him a little more as a man. But semantic distinctions are for times of leisure, not times of action, and we had work to do.

The Chenoo was waiting for us when we reached the predicted clearing. He was gigantic, over thirty feet tall. His leathery skin was pure white, and he had red eyes glaring with hatred for lesser species. He smelled of frost and cold. When he moved, it was usually in a stooped-over position, as though on all fours, but he could straighten up and stand on two legs to fight. It was in this posture that he met us. In his right hand he carried his weapon—a dragon's horn, which he could hurl with fearsome velocity.

My companion, just as he had told me, was an accomplished and experienced hunter. He had an arrow nocked in his bow before he'd had time to stop running and plant his feet for a shot. He fired on the run, then slowed down as he pulled another arrow from his quiver. Meanwhile, I ran on, hoping that his arrows would keep the ice demon occupied long enough to let me get into closer quarters for my own brand of fighting.

The Chenoo, moving with deceptive speed for such a large creature, dodged the first arrow easily and moved into a defensive crouch. As I came racing up, he swiped at me with one huge hand. I moved to evade the blow, but his sharp claws raked my side and caused me to lose my balance. I fell forward and rolled over, thus managing to regain my feet in a minimal amount of time. I spun on my left foot and faced him once more.

He was dodging the second arrow as I charged him again. My object was to cripple him, so I did not stand to fight. Instead, I ran by him, slashing at his left leg with my short-sword as I went. The wound I made was not deep, but it would slow him down and make him more of a match for us.

But now I was in a dangerous position—traveling at top speed with my back toward the Chenoo. I could feel those red eyes fixed on my back as he lifted his dragon's horn to take aim.

I turned around just in time to see the boy's third arrow hit the demon's right arm at the same moment he released the horn. The projectile came at my chest with unbelievable velocity and struck me with an impact that drove me back against the ground. But it did not pierce my

skin; the protective magic of the Angel in Black was still as strong as ever.

I lay on the ground for nearly a minute, dazed by the force of the blow. In the meantime, my Micmac friend had managed to place another bolt in the Chenoo, who had been attempting to pry loose the first. This new arrow stuck in at the base of his neck, just above the collarbone. He slapped at it, and the shaft broke off just above the point, leaving a fragment embedded within his skin. The Indian nocked another arrow.

The Chenoo was beginning to realize that this was not his battle, and that the safest course lay in withdrawal. My senses were just now starting to function again. I made a waving motion to the right. The boy saw it, and correctly interpreted it as a sign to herd the demon in that direction. He didn't know what I had planned, but he was prepared to trust my judgment. He let fly his arrow just past the Chenoo's right ear. Having no other recourse, our quarry turned to his left and fled once more through the trees.

The lad came over to me and helped me to my feet. He tried to ask if I were all right, but I waved his question aside. We had to keep moving, keep the Chenoo on the run. And we had to keep him going in a certain direction. Short of breath though I was, I explained how I wanted the creature pursued and, as an afterthought, told him that now was the time to put the earplug in his right ear. He obeyed me, and I put my own earplugs in, also. Total silence enveloped me, and I kept running.

It was an eerie feeling, moving at top speed through this ghostly forest with no sounds at all. The earlier portion of the hunt had been silent, true, but it had been a natural silence, a hushed stillness of expectation. This was totally different, an absence of all sound, and it gave the chase a dream-like quality that took the edge of reality off it.

The Chenoo moved through the woods and we followed, flanking it on either side and guiding its motion. The wounds we had inflicted were enough to slow it down to our speed, and my companion was accurate enough with his arrows to keep it moving in the desired direction.

There was a flurry of motion ahead, and as I reached the stop I had been heading for I looked the scene over and nodded. The Wigguladum-moochkik had done their job well. They had prepared an ambush for the Chenoo, and had snared their prey perfectly as he moved past their trap. Strong ropes of magical strength bound him about the neck, waist, and limbs. The other ends of the ropes were tied securely to trees or boulders. The Chenoo strained against his bonds with all the fantastic strength at his command, but still could not loosen them. Several

of the very little people darted around his feet, checking the fastenings and making double sure that they were right.

The Chenoo screamed.

The earth itself seemed ready to split from the sound. The ground trembled, and leaves flew from the trees. All of nature was shaking, and the vibrations made themselves felt along my backbone. The sound hit like a shock wave, making ripples in the air that blurred the vision and made my eyes water. The sound was so intense I could even smell it, and it had a harsh, metallic-acid taste on my tongue. It seemed to rip through my eardrums as though there were no plugs there at all. My head felt ready to explode.

But I survived. Over to my left, I saw my comrade fall helplessly to the ground, clutching desperately at his head, trying, somehow, to keep out that sound from his half-vulnerable ears. This is what I had been fearing most; the scream of the Chenoo is fatal to the hearer (with the exception of the Wigguladum-moochkik and a few other magical creatures with special immunity). Even my earplugs, with their strong charms, had been unable to shield me from the total effect of the yell. But I had only been able to make one earplug for the boy.

I ran to the fallen Indian. I picked up the bow he had dropped and pulled an arrow from the quiver. With one shot, I put the bolt into the demon's throat; it would not kill him, but it would make screaming difficult for him in the future. Then I knelt beside the boy and looked him over.

He was still alive. My one earplug had at least managed to do that for him. His breathing was very shallow, and all the color was drained from his face, but he was alive. His left ear—the unprotected one—was swollen and cracked; the skin there felt dead to the touch. He would be deaf in that ear permanently. His right ear appeared unscathed; it would probably remain serviceable.

Having satisfied myself as to the boy's condition, I turned back to the Chenoo. There is only one way to kill one of those creatures and it is a messy task. But I had to do it.

I untied the pot from around my waist and placed it on the ground. Then, short-sword in hand, I climbed up the Chenoo's tree-like leg until I reached his chest. It was like climbing a mountain of ice. The cold of his skin bit into me, numbing my fingers and toes almost instantly and making it difficult to use them. The demon writhed and twisted as I climbed, trying to shake me off him, but the ropes held him fast and he could not make me fall.

My position was precarious and hard to maintain. With my left arm holding tightly around his neck, I thrust my sword into his chest. The Chenoo jerked even harder now; I nearly fell, and I was afraid for just a moment that even the strong ropes of the pixies would not be able to contain him. But they did, and I continued my incision. I hacked and hewed a hole in his chest; haste, not surgical precision, was the guiding factor. A cold, gooey, greenish-white liquid oozed out of the wound, and wherever it touched me its coldness burned like acid.

Then I had his chest opened. I reached in and pulled out his heart. It was a block of ice, colder than cold, and my hand lost whatever feeling had remained the instant it touched it. I dropped to the ground, holding it now in both hands. The numbness was spreading rapidly up my arms. I had to work quickly. Running over to where I had placed the pot, I dropped the heart into it. Then I blew on my hands for a little bit, trying to bring some semblance of life back to them.

The instant that feeling returned to my digits, I took the vial of salamander oil I had brought and unstoppered the top. Immediately upon contact with the air, the red liquid began frothing and bubbling. I poured the valuable fluid over the ice-heart in the pot, then stood back.

The salamander is a fire-elemental, and salamander oil has magical warming properties. The moment it touched the Chenoo's heart a cloud of steam arose, obscuring my view of what was happening. I could plainly hear, though, the crackling and sizzling as the utter frigidity of the heart gave way to the heat of the oil. The heart was melting. Slowly at first, then at a greater rate, the block of ice that had served as the demon's vital organ turned to water. More water, and more, and more, began to appear in the bottom of the pot. As the pot filled, it also grew, and the amount of water seemed to grow with it. Now it was the size of a large dog. Now it was the size of a horse. Now a house. And a barn.

There is only one way to kill a Chenoo—melt its heart completely. But this is not as simple as it sounds, for a Chenoo's heart is the quintessence of iciness, and holds within it a veritable flood of water. Many would-be Chenoo killers had been drowned by not taking the proper precautions before melting the heart.

Finally the pot stopped growing in size, indicating that the heart was completely melted. At this same instant, a gigantic spasm hit the Chenoo, like some galvanating shock being passed through a corpse. Then all life escaped him. The ropes that held him would not let his body fall, and so the lifeless demon just hung there in the clearing, limp and loose.

Still the properties of the salamander oil were not exhausted. The water

in the pot began to boil, and steam began to bellow forth. Within a minute, the Canadian forest seemed as hot and human as a Brazilian jungle. And as more and more steam dissipated into the air, the pot began to shrink once again. And eventually, it returned to its original small size.

I looked inside it, hoping there might still be some of the salamander oil unused, for that is a difficult commodity to come by. But the pot was completely empty. So I shrugged my shoulders and tied the pot back around my waist. Then I went over to the still-inert figure of the Indian lad. I hoisted him up over my shoulder easily and started back toward the village.

Back inside the hut that had been my original departure point, I laid the boy's spirit down beside his body, which was lying on the ground next to mine. Then I settled down to my own body. I took a deep breath, dreading the feeling that I knew would be coming. Then I re-entered my body, and I felt confined, once more, to the most mundane of worlds. It's a feeling that lasts only a moment, fortunately, that loss of freedom. I do not really despise our sphere, for it is the gateway that makes all other worlds possible. But, for that one instant of returning, it always seems the most suffocating of prisons.

I sat up.

The wigwam was still crowded with the tribal elders. I gave them one sweeping, contemptuous glance, then turned my attentions to the boy who lay stretched out on the hard ground, lifeless and unmoving. Carefully, I took the Angel in Black pendant from around my neck and put it around his. Holding the Angel cupped in my left hand, I jabbed my right forefinger at the boy's chest, just above the heart. His body jerked. I did it again, and got the same reaction. Once more. The boy groaned, and his eyelids flickered. I grabbed his wrist. There was a pulse there, weak right now but gaining in strength. I signed and put the pendant back around my own neck. Then I stood up and addressed the elders.

"This lad tampered with the forces of the supernatural, forces he did not understand, and, in doing so, brought havoc unwittingly upon your village. It was just and proper that you should send him to hire me, for he will have to pay my price and it will be a high one. But you were not content with this punishment. You consigned his spirit to the second sphere, supposedly to help me. In doing this, you placed him in jeopardy far beyond anything he might have deserved. You, too, have tampered with powers beyond your comprehension, and your crime is far worse than his—for he acted out of ignorance, while you acted from willful maliciousness.

"I therefore charge you thusly: that this lad shall be your next chief, upon the death of your present chief, and that you shall respect him as you would one of your great warriors. For I have fought at his side against a mighty Chenoo, and he bespoke well for himself indeed. He is, perhaps, more of a man than you deserve to be led by, but I am an optimist by nature and inclined to generosity."

The boy began stirring, and his eyes were opened. I turned back to him and knelt at his side. "How do you feel?" I asked.

His throat was hoarse, and his voice barely audible. "The whole left side of my head is numb."

I nodded slowly. "It is the effect of the Chenoo's yell. You will be deaf on that side, beyond any power to heal." I saw no reason to lie to him, and he took the blow in stride. He winced slightly, but accepted it.

"What is your price?" he asked after a moment.

"Your left ear," I replied. "I can remove it painlessly, and with no harm to the rest of your body. It is of no further use to you, and of great importance to me." He bit his lip and there was a tear in his eye. No man likes the idea of disfigurement, even of a totally useless organ. But he knew instinctively the truth in what I said, and again accepted.

A deaf ear. The key ingredient I had been lacking for the spell I could use to rob the dragon Cheepichealm of his hearing and thus fulfill my bargain with the Wigguladum-moochkik.

I do not always take my payment with pleasure.



OLD CITY OF JADE

by Thomas H. Knight

THOMAS H. KNIGHT appeared a few times in the old science fiction magazines: *The Man Who Was Dead*, *ASTOUNDING STORIES OF SUPER-SCIENCE*, April, 1930; *The Revenge of the Chosen*, *WONDER STORIES QUARTERLY*, Fall, 1930; and *Great Green Things*, *WONDER STORIES*, April, 1931, come to my mind. The present story, which a number of readers have asked for, represents his only appearance in *WEIRD TALES*, and he did not appear under his own name in any of the other weird story magazines of the period.

WE WERE IN A BEASTLY TIGHT corner, a hopeless half-dozen of us flat on our faces in a shellhole, cut off, barraged, cold meat, about at the end of things, when I first met Cedric Lawrence Baxter.

I call it a shellhole, though really it was a crater into which a truck could duck and hide; but at that, not so deep that at any moment it could not be plowed and spattered a little deeper by one of the mortar bombs the Germans were so generously tossing at us.

I was a First Looey in those piping days of hate, and had been ordered out with a double handful of men to see what could be done about a few vicious machine-gun nests which were holding up, it seemed, the entire

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Allied armies. My men had dropped before those devilish guns like a pitiful swath of unripe grain tossed into the flicking knives of a giant reaper. Checked and beaten from our purpose, only six of us reached the doubtful haven of that shellhole. Every German gun in the country began potting us, which was the only objection we had to our habitating the crater.

It was a rather strategic position. From its vantage point we were able—when we could get in a shot—to tumble a gunner across his hot-barreled gun in nice fashion, and that was the very thing for which we had been ordered out.

Then some of the more ambitious Germans climbed trees to get the odds of altitude against our sharpshooting, but that did not last long. At sniping, two—in fact six of us—could play, and we did. We dumped them out of their branches like lead-stuffed crows.

But it couldn't last long. All they had to do was to land one cannon-cracker in among us and—yes, we had reason to believe we were at the end of things all right.

"You guys can stay here an' wait to get all scattered around, if you want to!" shouted Runt Ford with a blistering oath. "I'm goin'!" And before we could stop him he had gone over the rim of the crater in a last mad run. Not away from the enemy though! With fixed bayonet, a fixed expression on his face, a fixed purpose in his heart, he went at them!

Runt took perhaps three steps. A hail of metal twanged the air above our ears, over our crater; then the heavy whine of it stopped, waiting for the next enmaddened one of us to make the break.

But before any more of us decided upon a last rush across the machine-gun punctured spaces, our side reached up its sleeve and played an unexpected ace in the shape of a begoggled laddie flying a reckless Spad.

That chap showed the German marksmen to just what an art machine-gunnery could be developed. His Spad roared and plunged and twisted and dove and came and went, its twin guns all the while sputtering a spray of death. By the time he had played his hand and had shot the obstinate nests empty of active members, we—the five of the shellhole—had taken advantage of the interruption and had tumbled into our own trenches.

But the lad of the flaming Vickers paid for his timely temerity. Some of those flying bullets had clipped him. He came down on edge; landed on his nose. We, staring wide-eyed, saw the dark smudge of smoke puff from the wreck; saw the merciless list of the flame; saw his body dangling from the

cockpit. Helpless and trapped, he and his wreck at once became the target of various scattered weapons.

So the five of the shellhole, backed by the full rifle-power of the whole trench, sallied forth again. We jerked him out of his sizzling coffin, and while the lead whistled its song about our ears and flaked up little puffs of dust at our feet, he came in to safety on my back.

Then we went out in force and took the trench the Spad had cleared of guns for us; and kept going, taking more trenches and more ground until our little sortie became a successful, big onward "push." And it all started with the reckless devil from the skies who popped in just in time to root out the nests and make the sacrifice play that allowed five desperate runners to make home.

Thus I met Cedric—a name that does not altogether typify a hombre who can shoot the eyelashes off an enemy while dropping out of the skies on the end of a wing—and we became fast friends. But we actually saw little of each other until we were home again.

And then, because I had a deep feeling for the long, unhandsome flyer who had saved me from playing a harp before I was ready, and because, I suppose, he had a soft spot for the soldier on whose back he had traversed a certain wicked stretch of France, we kept in touch with each other. But little did I guess that some day he would lead me into as eerie an experience, as strange, as almost unbelievable an adventure as any man ever experienced.

After the war I followed Cedric's peacetime flying triumphs with a great deal of pleasure. Often he would drop in to explain some new gadget to make his plane do this or that, or to talk over his next cross-country flight. When he flew across the top of South America, the first to do it, in splendid time, I was particularly proud.

"Cede, old boy," I congratulated him when next he popped in, "you've got Lindy spiked to the mast now, haven't you? Sure was a dandy flight. Thrown away your old hats?"

"Not from what you mean, Soldier," he answered, addressing me as he always did. "But my head's swelled all tight from plans I have in it. And you, my boy, are in on 'em. Put your feet up on the table and I'll tell you about it."

"All right, shoot!" I agreed. And I heard about it; and in the hearing of it let myself in for the experience I considered the queerest, the most fantastic a man ever went into.

"When I left Quito, Ecuador, to fly over that South American

wilderness," explained Cedric, his pipe going like a blast furnace, "I came, after about six hours to the Orinoco. That shining river was a fine guide over the thick sea of waving trees and jungle, and for a while I followed it. Then I left it to cut across lots, and after a bit—I know I can find it again—I saw something I'm willing to bet eyes haven't looked on for—well, however long it is since that pre-historic civilization faded away."

"What was it?" I asked, at once interested.

"I passed over a deep, wide gulley," went on Cedric, "and about the middle of it, on the top of a cone-like hill, I saw a shining greenish square of something. I couldn't tell what it was. It seemed to be of about three or four acres.

"I circled over it and saw then that in the bottom of that valley was a town laid out in regular squares about the size of our city blocks, but I couldn't determine anything further. I couldn't get close enough. I couldn't, Soldier, get into the valley.

"All the air around there was clear, but the air in that valley was transparent to the point that the little town looked at though it were set in a spotless block of clear, clear crystal. And when I gave it another look I decided, Soldier me boy, that the green square on the top of the hill was a water-tank or reservoir."

"Why couldn't you find out?" I broke in. "What do you mean—you couldn't get into the valley?"

"Just exactly that. There's no air in that hollow. Or perhaps I should say the air's not right. The moment I dropped in below the level of the sides of the valley, it became hard breathing. The deeper I went the harder it got. I had to get out. It was just the same as trying for altitude without oxygen."

"Well, what are you going to do about it?" I asked.

"A-h-h!" smiled Cedric, puffing great clouds from his pipe. "A timely question, my sharpshooter. I'm going to look into that valley. Pop in and pay that town a call. There's not supposed to be such high-grade civilization as that down there, but any village that sports a reservoir or a swimming-tank like that should be worth looking into. And, Soldier, you shall go with me."

"Oh, I shall, shall I? Suppose I—"

"Listen. I have new style oxygen masks I was about ready to offer the government. We'll try 'em out. A mask a lot like the old army style with a small, easily carried tank of concentrated breath to go on your back. We'll drop into that valley and—"

"But—but—are there places to land? Isn't it all jungle?" I stalled.

"All around, yes. But in the valley there are fields."

"But why pick on me? You need another pilot. Or a navigator. I don't know a propeller from a tail spin. Get yourself an archeologist, a scientific dude—"

"Listen, Soldier. The malamute who goes with me slings a gat on each hip, a machine-gun on his back, and he knows how to use 'em. You're elected. I'll take one of your learned bozos next time, after you and I've shot up the town if that seems the right and proper thing to do. Who knows what we'll run into? I want some one along who can put a bullet twixt the peepers of those saber-toothed tigers we might find."

So about three weeks later I was seeing the top of South America from the enclosed cockpit of a fleet, sturdy plane, looking down upon those oceans and oceans of heavy jungle, and deciding that a forced landing would carry all the earmarks of being "just too bad." I was somewhat relieved to remember I had left my affairs at home in good shape.

Nor had Cedric forgotten the machine-gun he had threatened would be on my back. I chaffed him quite a bit about that unnecessary weight sticking out on the bow of our ship, but, like a schoolboy with a tin sword at his side hoping to find Indians or pirates or something up the next alley, the long awkward sky-bird only smiled and said it was there if we needed it, which we might. Before many hours would pass I was to be glad my staunch friend had played the boy and brought it along.

We reached the Orinoco toward the end of that first day out from Quito, and as the shades of night came upon us rested on its broad surface at the foot of a high tapering cliff that pierced into the heavens like a great finger. Among other things Cedric's plane was shod with a wheel-pontoon landing combination that here proved his ingenuity along these lines.

"Here's where we leave the river in the morning," Cedric had said as he sweetly put her down, "and cut due east for about two hundred miles. Then we'll keep our eyes peeled."

It was after about two hours flying next morning that, following Cedric's pointing finger, I looked down to see a great deep valley, in the center of which gleamed the greenish square of the reservoir. My heart was pumping hard within me as I made out down beyond the shining surface of the water a little symmetrical town. When Cedric pointed the nose of our brave ship, *The Hummingbird*, down into that valley of mystery, every fiber of my being responded to the excitement of the moment.

I felt a tickling in my throat, a shortness of breath, but I was too excited to give much thought to it until Cedric pointed to the masks

hanging in readiness before us. Then I knew that he, too, was feeling the rarity of the atmosphere.

I opened the little cabin door and leaned out to watch that square come glimmering up to us, and almost watched too long. For, as I then hurriedly donned my mask, I was gasping for breath, almost suffocated. As Cedric had said, there was no air in that valley. Not breathable air, at least. I turned the oxygen into my mask through the tap on my shoulder and drank deeply of it.

My pilot companion skimmed the top of the green surface. Then he shouted, his words echoing my decision: It's not water. Solid. Looks like ice. A transparent rock. Or marble."

"Can you land on it?" I wanted to know, shouting back. "Only looks like about a hundred feet across. Look, Cede!" I cried, excitement taking me as we swept on and over the town. "It's made of the same stuff. See how it sparkles. Cede! We're unearthing something, all right! This place is inhabited. It's in up-to-the-minute preservation. Can you put her down on that small surface?"

I could see that Cedric shared my excitement. His hands gripped the wheel of the plane until the knuckles of his hands stood out in tight whiteness. Then my eyes turned again to the snug little town, a town of almost fairy beauty. The buildings, or homes, or whatever they were, appeared to be of only one story, low and squat, but the town was laid out in squares very much the size of our city blocks; the streets were clean.

"Must be sleeping or hiding," I shouted to Cedric as he swung again toward the square hill-top. "Think you can land?"

He paid no attention to me; so I took the hint and sat silent while my comrade, who certainly knew his joy-sticks, put our big crate safely down on that tricky landing-place. Almost stalling, almost pancaking, he managed to maintain just enough glide to put his wheels down on the near edge of the surface we had once believed was green water. We rolled along. The other edge and the immediate drop beyond came toward us quickly. Cedric ruddered his plane into a half-circle, thus gaining distance in which to stop, and on the opposite edge, the very edge, we came to rest.

"Whew!" our expressions through the glass of our masks said to each other. "Gosh! Close enough!"

He stopped his engine, and the sudden quieting of humming motor and singing wires and struts in the strange peace of that weird valley seemed doubly quiet. Then we turned our ship to be in readiness for a possible hurried take-off, and set our faces toward the long flight of green steps

that led to a hushed city below. Silently we gazed into the valley; then our hands instinctively settling upon the pistols are our hips, we faced each other.

It was mighty queer. Mighty queer. Why did we see no sign of life? No movement? Why hadn't some one heard us? Why weren't the streets already crowded with curious, staring natives of some race or another, instead of this strange, empty stillness?

"Soldier, my son," said Cedric, talking plainly but quietly through his mask, "something wrong here. Have they all fled? Did we scare 'em that much? Are they hiding from us—or for us? What do you say?"

"I say let's find out," I replied. "Pump a shell into your chambers, Cede, and let's go. I wouldn't miss the rest of this for anything on earth or anywhere else."

Without a word, Cedric started to descend the steps. I followed, my holster flaps open, my fingers ready to find my pistol butts.

It was a long way down, but after a while, treading cautiously we were upon their streets, my own heart the noisiest thing I could hear. At once we could see that everything was in splendid preservation, seeming to be neither very old nor weather-worn. And yet there was still no sign of life.

But what a veritable fairy town we were in! Marble I had at first believe it all to be, but now I decided it was jade, all of that same greenish hue. The little houses—huts almost—all a-glitter beneath the sun. Then we turned the first corner into another street—and stopped dead in our tracks!

For there upon that street was life! There, before us, to be faced, to be dealt with, were natives. Either friend or foe they were, the important thing we must at once, and perhaps all too soon, find out.

Down the street a little, in the shade of the houses on our side, lay a native, a golden-bronzed Indian, fast asleep, a gaudy blanket across his chest. Halfway down the block, flat on his side enjoying the sun, lay a dog. On the opposite side, his head deep in the great basket of fruit against which he lolled as he sat, slept another native. Above and behind him, perched on a ledge over a door, I saw a great, gorgeous parrot.

"Sleepy lot," muttered Cedric. "Must be siesta-ing. The watchdogs down here don't watch, do they? But we gotta wake 'em. Gotta find out things."

So like a pair of schoolboys out on a prank, we crowded behind the corner of a house as Cedric uttered a medium-sized "Hey!" Then another, a little larger "Hey!"

But neither dog nor parrot nor man ruffled a hair, waved a feather or

flicked an eye. Cedric and I looked at each other. Through the mask I could see his wondering face. Mine, I know, was questioning, wondering. It felt white and bloodless. We were anxious, eager, excited. And in addition, some other feeling was beginning to grip us.

We shouted together then, each ready to bolt furiously if our voices brought too abrupt a response, but the sleepers slept on. We made ourselves conspicuous on the street then, our pistols in our hands. Cedric raised his weapon, and though I feared the sound of its fierce crash in that death-like quiet, I feared the sticky silence about me more.

The pistol roared, the echoes pounded back and forth across the street, but the four before us refused to hear.

"They're dead," I whispered, a light sweat on my brow. "They're dead. This is a city of the dead! Something's happened!"

"You're darn tootin', somethin's happened," laughed Cedric somewhat strangely. "However did you figure that out?" Then, quickly overcoming our little case of nerves, we started toward the man nearest us.

Cautiously we went, suspecting trickery, our pistols in readiness. As Cedric at last went down on a knee beside the native, I, remembering what I'd heard of these fellows and watching for a sudden jerking-forth of a short spear or a poison blow-pipe, stood close guard, my pistol ready to beat him to the kill.

"Dead!" said Cedric, straightening up.

"Dead?"

"Yes. Dead. Don't you see, Soldier? No oxygen in the valley; all wiped out. It's only our masks that let us live."

"Yes," I agreed, "but it couldn't have happened more than a few days ago." Then with a new, important thought striking me, "Cede, how long will our tanks last?"

"Hours. Come on. Let's see it all."

Cedric started on, but I, curious, perhaps morbid, knelt by the sleeper. I put my hand on his bronzed arm and jumped hastily back.

"Cede! Look here! Feel!" I commanded through the glass on my mask. I placed Cedric's fingers upon the silent one's arm, and saw him try to indent the flesh. I saw his fingers—as I felt mine—fruitlessly endeavor to make a depression in the iron-like flesh.

"Cede, we're dreaming. We're both crazy," I said excitedly, "or else nicely fooled. This isn't a man. This is an image. A painted iron or stone image."

"Not on your life! This is deeper than you and I imagine," argued

Cedric. "He's real, but this atmosphere has done something to him. Preserved him wonderfully. When we go we'll take him along. Some one who understands these things ought to look into—"

"Cede!" I gasped. "Perhaps—perhaps—why of course, he's been that way a long time. Years! Hundreds!"

"Yes, by gum! Thousands! Heck, man! This sorta gets under your hide. Come on."

We paused as we passed those little houses to gaze inside, but we saw nothing more startling than a few lolling figures until we were halfway down the street.

And then in a dwelling different from the others in that it was built of a blue stone instead of the green, we saw a sight—a tableau of beauty too splendid for words.

The sun streamed in through a substance something like glass in an opening in the wall, to throw its crimson rays, as though it were a spotlight upon a Belasco stage, onto a couch. A couch draped in royal, colorful draperies. A couch around which sat and lay and lolled five or six beautiful handmaidens. A couch upon which lay the most exquisitely beautiful creature I have ever seen.

Cedric and I stood frozen still. My heart pounded. My eyes stared till they hurt. A thousand, perhaps ten thousand years may have elapsed since that vacuum-like valley full of death had descended upon these sleepers to slowly, gently suffocate them, and then to preserve them so mysteriously. And now, after all those long years, a gangling, homely aviator had brought an ignorant soldier to look upon them. Two unscientific idiots who now cursed their ignorance and their inability to appreciate properly the treasures of antiquity upon which they gazed.

Cedric and I slowly, reverently, stepped into the room. We were passing among royalty, we knew. Admiringly we gazed upon the splendid golden forms of the beautiful, lightly-clad maidens. I stood by the royal bed and gazed deeply upon its mistress.

Not of Maya, not of Toltec blood was she. There was none of the heavy Aztec features or Indian aquiline. This girl was ancient and of gilded flesh, but if it were not for her color would have passed as a present-day type of American womanhood—a thousand-year-dead golden Ayesha

beyond even Rider Haggard's wildest dreams.

I felt Cedric's hand upon my arm. I followed him out, my knees unsteady, a great covering of perspiration all about me and beneath my mask. I saw Cedric lean against a house-front, saw him operate the tap of

his oxygen tank. I regulated mine, and after I had cut off my supply a little, I felt somewhat better.

We crossed to the dog in the street, so life-like and sleepy-like in his death that I found myself lightly wondering if the fleas upon him were hard and flint-like, also. The flesh of the man with his head in the fruit was like that of his brother across the street. The fruit was more wonderful than I've ever seen, but like the flesh of the natives—hard as iron. The parrot above his head had one eye open. He looked without seeing at the two strange men from some other world, demons whose masked faces were not like his old master's.

I turned my oxygen off a bit more as we passed up that street, not especially interested now in the open doors and the few lolling figures. A queer feeling had me by the throat; my head was swimming. I wanted to sit down to rest, to sleep—to sleep. But by that time we knew it was the death, the slow, gentle death of the valley reaching out for us.

"Soldier," said Cedric weakly, "come on. Don't quit. Let's—let's get out. It—it's gettin' to us."

But we couldn't get out. Up on the corner he was the first to stagger and fall. I fell beside him. But what did it matter? Had we not found something of which the rest of the world could not even dream? Why not sink gently down and sleep peacefully in the heart of our find? Sleep is the tonic, the medicine for the weary, and I was weary.

Just before I dozed into deep oblivion I turned off my oxygen completely, too senseless to wonder if good old Cedric had done the same or why we were doing it. An old wizened bronzed man in a near doorway was the last thing I saw. An old fellow stretched out flat in his peaceful death stretched out flat—flat —

I don't know how long I slept. The sun looked at about midday when next I awoke. I sat up straight to find I had thrown my mask partly off sometime during my heavy slumber. Cedric was lying flat on his back, still as death, his mask lifted from his nostrils. I reached out, found his pulse; then again my eyes sleepily rested on the old man before me.

Dreamily, still not caring to move, I watched that old man, absently pondering the fact that we were breathing and living without our masks, pondering whether to wake Cedric and move on or rest a little longer; wondering, too, about the feeling of heaviness in my lungs, the ache and prickle in my bones and very sinews.

My eyes must be bothering me, also, I decided, for they made me believe I had seen a shudder pass over the frame of the old man before me.

All part of my lethargy, of course, I realized. And then—I saw his finger twitch!

I shook Cedric roughly. I was frightened. He awoke like a man doped. But I shook him fiercely, seeing as I shook a jerking of the fingers of the old man who had been asleep a thousand, or perhaps ten thousand, years.

"Cede!" I gasped, pointing, "he's awake. He's coming alive!"

"Who? What did you—you're crazy," murmured Cedric, sleepily. "Just plain drunk or—?" Then he stopped, his words, or his oath of surprise, frozen on his lips.

Cedric rose to his knees, seeing with staring eyes the old man roll over on his side. Then we helped each other to our feet and went staggering along to make our escape. Up on top of the hill over that long flight of steps our great friendly plane was waiting. We hurried to get to it, eager to hear the roar of its motor again.

But we were too late. As we turned into that street again from which the long green steps led to the top of the hill and the Hummingbird, we ran into six or eight tall, splendid men of bronze and gold. They stood transfixed, their surprize even greater than ours. But only for a moment did their surprize stay them. Those almost naked fellows uttered one combined yell and showed us their heels. Then we hurried on, more strongly now, for the long stairway.

But, with courage returning, they waylaid us. Out from another street they poured to overwhelm us, to pinion my arms behind me, to make my still sleepy brain believe from their ferocity that it was "finis" for us.

A few high shouts. A lot of flourishing of hands and arms, and then I saw that fast, desperate punishment was to be mine. My guards dropped away, leaving only two to hold me, a matter those two golden giants found a very simple task. Between them, at the length of their arms, I stood as helpless as a rabbit tacked on a door, facing a third man—the executioner.

That devil held a short spear in his hand. He measured the distance between us, drew his weapon back once, twice, as he gaged and sighted for my heart. Then for the third time he drew back his arm, the muscles rippling and tautening for the thrust. Foolishly, in my helplessness, I realized he'd hurl it right through me. I saw the muscles knot, closed my eyes.

Then I heard a scuffle, a gasp for breath, the crack of a heavy, friendly automatic. The fellow before me pitched flat on his face at my feet. Good old Cedric! Once an ace, always an ace. Again he had played a high card!

I fought then, but I might have saved my efforts. Awed as my guards certainly were by the magic of the thunder and the sudden death, yet they

bravely held me tight. And next moment Cedric was again overpowered.

But his shot had for some reason or other changed their tactics. In their midst we were hurried back over the street to the blue house of the Princess. The man we had first found was gone now. The dog came to snap at our heels; the parrot was flapping his wings.

Then we were again in the presence of the beautiful girl and her attendants. Her warriors jabbered out their story; explaining to that gorgeous, now living Ayesha the facts concerning us as though they had merely napped for a minute or two to awaken and find us there; not as though they had slept a death sleep for years upon years, centuries upon centuries.

The Princess did not like us. That was very easy to see. Her expression was one of fear and distrust. Any mercy we may have expected from her womanly heart became quickly a hope lost.

She looked closely at Cedric, staring at his mask. Then one of the men stepped up and gingerly examined it.

"Take it off, Chingascook," cried Cedric. "I almost forgot the blasted thing was still there." He bent his head and shook it, and the native, seeing it fall away from the face behind it, jerked it off.

I watched the Princess. Watched her for the least sign of pleasure or kindness. A smile from her would be an eagerly clutched-at straw, for we knew that the next executioner who stepped up to heave a javelin would not have Cedric's pistol to contend with. They had us too securely now for that. But the face of the Princess showed no emotion. Her eyes were not kindly toward Cedric.

Then they jerked off my mask. And this time, after a long, long look—and I can say it with modesty for Cedric was, despite everything else about him, a very homely owl—the eyes of the Princess grew soft, her lovely mouth lost its harshness.

"Well, for the love of old razor blades!" approved Cedric heartily, "if you're not making a hit, Soldier my boy, you sheik!" But his slight hilarity was soon checked. These people had evidently been a race of fast thinkers. And now they carried this characteristic on, their little nap not changing them a trifle.

The Princess pointed to Cedric and gave a command. We were taken out on the street. They held poor old Cedric tight while I stared at it all, horror-eyed. Then another executioner stood before him, a spear in his hand, his muscles tensed.

"Don't! Stop!" I yelled, coming to my senses at last. I struggled free,

fighting mad. But before I could take a step, before I could draw a gun, they had me again. The devils! If I could only have got my gun in my hand! Two shots and Cedric would have been released. Then with his guns blazing, too, we could have—

Just a dream. We were helpless. I was jerked back. The executioner spread his feet wide again, balanced himself for the thrust. I closed my eyes. I couldn't watch it. Not watch poor old Cedric go out like—

Then another sudden shout. A multitude of shouts. Down the street came a running figure, pointing back over his shoulder as he came to the crest of the hill behind the town. At once all eyes turned to where, like a great winged insect, stood our plane.

The Princess and her wise men stood and stared. Then we started off toward it, Cedric being marshaled along in front while I walked, still held, by the side of the littler upon which the Princess was carried. Her eyes were upon me all the time, and after a little the man on my right released me and then I felt, in place of his, the soft, warm hand of the Princess snuggle into mine!

"Soldier, dear heart," sang out Cedric over his shoulder to me, still able to meet things with a laugh though we knew not what we went to next moment. "Soldier, this looks a little better. They're taking us up to find out what the old Hummingbird can be. If we get half a break, make it a whole one. If you get a hand loose, pull some of your old army stuff and put a bullet into each of my cops, won't you? If I can get my mitts on my gats I'll do the same for you, eh, what?"

"Nothing else, Cede," I called back, the Princess looking up with an amused smile. "If only we can get to our guns!"

After a while we stood by the great plane, our brains full of a single thought. If we could man the splendid craft and roll her over the edge she would float us to safety. All we needed was a half-minute of swift, free action. If I could keep them off for that little time, Cedric would have the engine roaring. I'd do it if I could! "Give me half a break," I muttered and prayed twixt clenched teeth, "and I'll—"

"Well, if the Queenie ain't taken to little Soldier like he wuz her long-lost soulmate," I heard Cedric say in laughing sarcasm, though it struck me queer again that a man with the sense Cedric had could see anything funny at such a time. "Soldier, is your brain working? Do you know you hold a cute li'l hand like a yap when a pistol butt cries out to you? Snap out of it!"

But I was not so completely asleep as it had looked to Cedric. I knew what I could do with an automatic, but I wanted no false starts. I was

waiting for that moment when clean, fast action could turn any slight chance offered into a successful get-away. But I had action thrust upon me.

The Princess' litter had been carried near one of the **Hummingbird's** smooth wings. I stood beside her and watched a fellow come through the crowd to her carrying a large, heavy blade. A type of machete for jungle work. A knife, the keen edge of which was of copper, nicely tempered, a "lost" art in keeping with the "lost" tribe we had found.

He walked to the wing and without any more ado swung his arm for a blow. Cedric yelled and struggled to be free. I dropped my lady's lovely hand, took two fast steps toward the chopper, and swung my fist as heavily and straightly as I could. The blade went one way, the would-be finder-out of what a wing was made of the other.

Confusion, shouting, milling, a closing-in on us then, with knives and spears a-sparkle in the sun. I jerked my automatic and did to Cedric's guards what he said he'd do for me. And because I was busy about that business and was overlooking the guard who still held my left wrist, Cedric saved my life from the fellow's knife-thrust by living up to his promise.

Then Cedric, with a great bound or two, had gone—had ducked into the cabin of the plane and with all speed had set his spark and throttle and gadgets ready for motion. I heard his starter grinding the motor over as I raced for the plane. Then there came a sharp stinging in the back of my head, then—darkness.

I must have been unconscious for perhaps only a minute. I came back to my senses to see, first of all, that Cedric had gone. Gone! All I had to do to see what had become of him was to follow the eyes of the excited natives. The **Hummingbird** was off in the valley, a little above our level headed for home.

There was silence on that square as they watched, fascinated, the great bird that had gone, taking one of their visitors with it. Then they saw me there sitting up, and some of them rushed to me. My hand still held my pistol, while beside me lay the spear that luckily must have hit me broadside on.

I sprang to my feet, drawing my other gun, and backing away. They'd never take me now if I could help it! A spear came hurtling. I ducked. Over my shoulder I heard the whiz of it. Then I plunked out a shot, and the javelin-hurler, tasting my lead, fell on his face. Another arm in that crowd now closely ringing me in and forcing me backward ever closer and

closer to the edge, drew back for a throw. But I tossed first and the knees of another sagged and let him down.

"Devils!" I told them. "I'll teach you back numbers a thing or two 'fore you get me. You'll not take me!" Cedric was gone! Hard to believe—that! That Cedric would—desert! Out of the corner of my eye I saw the glisten of the sun on the wings of the speeding Hummingbird. "Crack!" spoke my Colt again. I took another pace back.

I was on the edge then, a smoking pistol in each hand. I'd stay there till the last shot. Then, when they rushed me, I'd go on over. A nice finish to my little archeological venture! A nice way out with a guy—Crack!—you'd called buddy—Crack!—off in the heavens headed for—Crack!—home!

I turned and glanced down into the depth of the valley. Ugh! Below me I saw a pile of white, gleaming bones. Circling over them I saw great birds. Some of the scavengers were down on the pile fighting, tearing. The latest victim, of course. And I—I would be the next. A white man, perhaps their first, to go their sacrificial way. To go plunging toward the hideous birds that, with these other brutes, had slept a long, long sleep to wake again to their beastly—

Then they came at me. I ducked and dodged and flung out my hot metal, kneeling on the edge of the bright surface, one foot over, ready to go.

Then a devilish roar behind me, a thunder of a million' guns in the air, and the mass of humanity pushing me over the edge wilted and crumbled. Machine-gun fire!

I had forgotten the gun that Cedric, in what I had called foolishness, had mounted on the nose of the plane; had, in fact, in the hot moments and my desperate plight and determination to make every shot count, forgotten Cedric.

But now, as he swept over, I threw out the empty clips from my pistols, inserted full ones, a fresh hope in my heart. Cedric roared on, swung around, came back. Slowly, once again, that big ship flopped in onto the small square and rolled to me. I raced toward it. Cedric appeared at the cabin door, guns in hands to cover my flight. Then, before I could prevent it, it had happened!

One of the Indians, anything but a coward—to give the devil his due in the face of mysterious happenings that must have been magic to him—came creeping under the fuselage and thrust his spear into Cedric's breast. Cedric fell back in the cabin and I made one more shot count on that prehistoric, thousand-year-old, dead-for-centuries murderer.

Then I sprang into the ship, dragged Cedric's body clear of the controls,

took my place in the pilot's seat. I had watched Cedric operate the ship, of course; knew what this and that was for, but as for flying—a kite had always buffaloed me.

But now I gave that ship the gun, tore that valley loose with the roar of our exhausts, dropped that big, powerful ship off the edge of the hill-top. I lifted her, swung around, headed for where I believed the Orinoco to lie. With one hand on the wheel, I ripped open Cedric's tunic with the other. He was bleeding profusely. Was I to lose him now after all we'd gone through? But what could I do? Jungle beneath me! Good old Cedric, staunch companion, bleeding to death at my feet.

I held my handkerchief tightly against his wound, staunched it, steadied my great quivering bird as she hurled forward, and for the first time really realized what I had done. There I sat in behind the controls of the powerful plane, driving her, keeping her on even keel, feeling her answer the pressure of my finger tips, yet really knowing no more about flying than did the men of bronze back there on the hill-top. It frightened me. If she stalled, if we hit a pocket, if—if—oh, a thousand and one if's!—what should I do? And Cedric, at my feet perhaps dying, perhaps—dead!

Then the silver of the great river catching the last flashes of the evening sun; and soon at full throttle I was over it. I eased down slowly, feeling my way, teaching myself the way down in a long glide. The river came up. Up! Up! Could I make it? I'd have to, or else—just as well a crash and the crocodiles as the spear through the body.

But I made it! A smooth one! And without waiting to anchor I turned to Cedric, then the medicine case, and in a little while I felt better about things; felt proud as punch about my air ability, thankful about Cedric.

We spend the night there. Next morning, with Cedric holding his own, I took off in a fashion I wished Cedric could have seen. Luck stayed with me. All day I—green—never with a wheel or joy-stick in my hand before, kept her going, and at the close of day again brought her in over Quito.

Tickled? Boy, that's not the word! I'd show 'em. "When they came out to greet us and found me operating that crate, wouldn't they shout?" I asked myself in my glee. Up came the field. Down we went. Easily. Nicely. A sweet glide. Man, I had it! What it took to run a plane I—

"Wham!" Something didn't work right. A "stall," I believe they call it. Not enough gliding angle. We went down flat, stood up on our nose, hung a while end on end, turned over.

I was in one bed, Cedric in the next some time after that, both decidedly the worse for rough treatment.

"Sorry I busted her up, Cede," I said for not the first time.

"Sorry nothing, idiot! Lots more where she came from. Soldier, you did yourself proud, but I'll have to teach you a bit before our next trip."

"Next! Next?"

"That's what I said. But say, Soldier, why did they, after all those years, come to life just when we sent in our card to 'em? Why did that suffocating something, that lack of proper air in that valley, lift away just when the butler announced us?"

"I've been thinking of that," I answered. "And it was because we did drop in, Cede. We stirred up the air. Our big old crate—gosh! I'm sorry she cracked up. I mean I'm sorry I cracked her up. Anyway, our crate opened up a current, started good air flowing in as we circled around. A breeze coming in did the rest."

"Right you are. That's my solution, too. No, I don't suppose we'll go back. I don't care for their funny little ways. But don't forget, Soldier, that you and I know; that you and I've seen; that you and I've been entertained by, in fact, down there somewhere east of the Orinoco, a tribe that slept for a thousand years or more. A race of handsome, splendid men, and beautiful, beautiful—my gosh! Soldier, wasn't your sweetie a gorgeous 1000 B.C. flapper?"

TO OUR READERS

From the first, when we started to announce the next feature in our Coming Next Issue department, I wondered when the time would come that something would go wrong. Well ... I've been lucky for over 30 issues.

But this time, due to circumstances beyond the control of the editor or the publisher, it was impossible to print issue No. 35 as originally laid out. The Grisly Horror, by Robert E. Howard, The Key to Cornwall, by Dr. Keller, From the Dark Halls of Hell, by G. G. Pendarves, and the rest of the stories we had made up, will be presented in future issues.

A RENDEZVOUS IN AVEROIGNE

by Clark Ashton Smith

(author of *The Nameless Offspring*, *The Hunters from Beyond*, etc.)

You, our active readers, have made it abundantly clear that you want to see more and more of the stories of CLARK ASHTON SMITH in our magazines, but that your desire is that these come from now out-of-print Arkham House collections, particularly the first two volumes, gathered in 1942 and 1944. With Volume 6, *Other Dimensions*, the Arkham House collections now embrace the entire corpus of this author's published fiction, the quality of which varies, of course, but the median of which compares favorably with the best to be found in pulp writing, and the top of which is streets ahead of nearly everyone else in the field. We are complying with your desires, but we shall make one exception: stories in the "Zothique" series of tales will not be reprinted, because the entire collection of them can be had in a handsome softcover book published by Ballantine, under the appropriate title, *Zothique*.

GERARD DE L'AUTOMNE WAS MEDITATING the rimes of a new ballade in honor of Fleurette, as he followed the leaf-arrassed pathway toward Vyones through the woodland of Averoigne. Since he was on his way to meet Fleurette, who had promised to keep a rendezvous among the

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oaks and beeches like any peasant girl, Gerard himself made better progress than the ballade. His love was at that stage which, even for a professional troubadour, is more productive of distraction than inspiration; and he was recurrently absorbed in a meditation upon other than merely verbal felicities.

The grass and trees had assumed the fresh enamel of a medieval May; the turf was figured with little blossoms of azure and white and yellow, like an ornate broidery; and there was a pebbly stream that murmured beside the way, as if the voices of undines were parleying deliciously beneath its waters. The sun-lulled air was laden with a wafture of youth and romance; and the longing that welled from the heart of Gerard seemed to mingle mystically with the balsams of the wood.

Gerard was a trouvere whose scant years and many wanderings had brought him a certain renown. After the fashion of his kind he had roamed from court to court, from chateau to chateau; and he was now the guest of the Comte de la Frenaie, whose high castle held dominion over half the surrounding forest. Visiting one day that Quaint cathedral town, Vyones, which lies so near to the ancient wood of Averoigne, Gerard had seen Fleurette, the daughter of a well-to-do mercer named Guillaume Cochin; and had become more sincerely enamored of her blond piquancy than was to be expected from one who had been so frequently susceptible in such matters. He had managed to make his feelings known to her; and, after a month of billets-doux, ballads and stolen interviews contrived by the help of a complaisant waiting-woman, she had made this woodland tryst with him in the absence of her father from Vyones. Accompanied by her maid and a man-servant, she was to leave the town early that afternoon and meet Gerard under a certain beech-tree of enormous age and size. The servants would then withdraw discreetly; and the lovers, to all intents and purposes, would be alone. It was not likely that they would be seen or interrupted; for the gnarled and immemorial wood possessed an ill-repute among the peasantry. Somewhere in this wood there was the ruinous and haunted Chateau des Faussesflammes; and, also, there was a double tomb, within which the Sieur Hugh du Malinbois and his chatelaine, who were notorious for sorcery in their time, had lain unconsecrated for more than two hundred years. Of these, and their phantoms, there were grisly tales; and there were stories of loup-garous and goblins, of fays and devils and vampires that infested Averoigne. But to these tales Gerard had given little heed, considering it improbable that such creatures would fare abroad in open daylight. The madcap Fleurette had professed herself

unafraid also; but it had been necessary to promise the servants a substantial pourboire, since they shared fully the local superstitions.

Gerard had wholly forgotten the legendry of Averoigne, as he hastened along the sun-flecked path. He was nearing the appointed beech-tree, which a turn of the path would soon reveal; and his pulses quickened and became tremulous, as he wondered if Fleurette had already reached the trysting-place. He abandoned all effort to continue his ballade, which, in the three miles he had walked from La Frenaise, had not progressed beyond the middle of a tentative first stanza.

His thoughts were such as would befit an ardent and impatient lover. They were now interrupted by a shrill scream that rose to an unendurable pitch of fear and horror, issuing from the green stillness of the pines beside the way. Startled, he peered at the thick branches; and as the scream fell back to silence, he heard the sound of dull and hurrying footfalls, and a scuffling as of several bodies. Again the scream arose. It was plainly the voice of a woman in some distressful peril. Loosening his dagger in its sheath, and clutching more firmly a long hornbeam staff which he had brought with him as a protection against the vipers which were said to lurk in Averoigne, he plunged without hesitation or premeditation among the low-hanging boughs from which the voice had seemed to emerge.

In a small open space beyond the trees, he saw a woman who was struggling with three ruffians of exceptionally brutal and evil aspect. Even in the haste and vehemence of the moment, Gerard realized that he had never before seen such men or such a woman. The woman was clad in a gown of emerald green that matched her eyes; in her face was the pallor of dead things, together with a faery beauty; and her lips were dyed as with the scarlet of newly flowing blood. The men were dark as Moors, and their eyes were red slits of flame beneath oblique brows with animal-like bristles. There was something very peculiar in the shape of their feet: but Gerard did not realize the exact nature of the peculiarity till long afterward. Then he remembered that all of them were seemingly club-footed, though they were able to move with surpassing agility. Somehow, he could never recall what sort of clothing they had worn.

The woman turned a beseeching gaze upon Gerard as he sprang forth from amid the boughs. The men, however, did not seem to heed his coming: though one of them caught in a hairy clutch the hands which the woman sought to reach toward her rescuer.

lifting his staff, Gerard rushed upon the ruffians. He struck a tremendous blow at the head of the nearest one—a blow that should have leveled the fellow to earth. But the staff came down on unresisting air, and

Gerard staggered and almost fell headlong in trying to recover his equilibrium. Dazed and uncomprehending, he saw that the knot of struggling figures had vanished utterly. At least, the three men had vanished; but from the middle branches of a tall pine beyond the open space, the death-white features of the woman smiled upon him for a moment with faint, inscrutable guile ere they melted among the needles.

Gerard understood now; and he shivered as he crossed himself. He had been deluded by phantoms or demons, doubtless for no good purpose; he had been the gull of a questionable enchantment. Plainly there was something after all in the legends he had heard, in the ill-renown of the forest of Averoigne.

He retraced his way toward the path he had been following. But when he thought to reach again the spot from which he had heard that shrill unearthly scream, he saw that there was no longer a path; nor, indeed, any feature of the forest which he could remember or recognize. The foliage about him no longer displayed a brilliant verdure; it was sad and funereal, and the trees themselves were either cypress-like, or were already sere with autumn or decay. In lieu of the purling brook there lay before him a tarn of waters that were dark and dull as clotting blood, and which gave back no reflection of the brown autumnal sedges that trailed therein like the hair of suicides, and the skeletons of rotting osiers that writhed above them.

Now, beyond all question, Gerard knew that he was the victim of an evil enchantment. In answering that beguileful cry for succor, he had exposed himself to the spell, had been lured within the circle of its power. He could not know what forces of wizardry or demonry had willed to draw him thus; but he knew that his situation was fraught with supernatural menace. He gripped the hornbeam staff more tightly in his hand, and prayed to all the saints he could remember, as he peered about for some tangible bodily presence of ill.

The scene was utterly desolate and lifeless, like a place where cadavers might keep their tryst with demons. Nothing stirred, not even a dead leaf; and there was no whisper of dry grass or foliage, no song of birds nor murmuring of bees, no sigh nor chuckle of water. The corpse-gray heavens above seemed never to have held a sun; and the chill, unchanging light was without source or destination, without beams or shadows.

Gerard surveyed his environment with a cautious eye; and the more he looked the less he liked it; for some new and disagreeable detail was manifest at every glance. There were moving lights in the wood that

vanished if he eyed them intently; there were drowned faces in the tarn that came and went like livid bubbles before he could discern their features.

And, peering across the lake, he wondered why he had not seen the many-turreted castle of hoary stone whose nearer walls were based in the dead waters. It was so gray and still and vast, that it seemed to have stood for incomputable ages between the stagnant heavens. It was ancienter than the world, it was older than the light; it was coeval with fear and darkness; and a horror dwelt upon it and crept unseen but palpable along its bastions.

There was no sign of life about the castle; and no banners flew above its turrets or its donjon. But Gerard knew, as surely as if a voice had spoken aloud to warn him, that here was the fountainhead of sorcery by which he had been beguiled. A growing panic whispered in his brain, he seemed to hear the rustle of malignant plumes, the mutter of demonian threats and plottings. He turned, and fled among the funereal trees.

Amid his dismay and wilderment, even as he fled, he thought of Fleurette and wondered if she were awaiting him at their place of rendezvous, or if she and her companions had also been enticed and led astray in a realm of damnable unrealities. He renewed his prayers, and implored the saints for her safety as well as his own.

The forest through which he ran was a maze of bafflement and eeriness. There were no landmarks, there were no tracks of animals or men; and the swart cypresses and sere autumnal trees grew thicker and thicker as if some malevolent will were marshalling them against his progress. The boughs were like implacable arms that strove to retard him; he could have sworn that he felt them twine about him with the strength and suppleness of living things. He fought them, insanely, desperately, and seemed to hear a crackling of infernal laughter in their twigs as he fought. At last, with a sob of relief, he broke through into a sort of trail. Along this trail, in the mad hope of eventual escape, he ran like one whom a fiend pursues; and after a short interval he came again to the shores of the tarn, above whose motionless waters the high and hoary turrets of that time-forgotten castle were still dominant. Again he turned and fled; and once more, after similar wanderings and like struggles, he came back to the inevitable tarn.

With a leaden sinking of his heart, as into some ultimate slough of despair and terror, he resigned himself and made no further effort to escape. His very will was benumbed, was crushed down as by the incumbence of a superior volition that would no longer permit his puny recalcitrance. He

was unable to resist when a strong and hateful compulsion drew his footsteps along the margent of the tarn toward the looming castle.

When he came nearer, he saw that the edifice was surrounded by a moat whose waters were stagnant as those of the lake, and were mantled with the iridescent scum of corruption. The drawbridge was down and the gates were open, as if to receive an expected guest. But still there was no sign of human occupancy; and the walls of the great gray building were silent as those of a sepulcher. And more tomb-like even than the rest was the square and overowering bulk of the mighty donjon.

Impelled by the same power that had drawn him along the lake-shore, Gerard crossed the drawbridge and passed beneath the frowning barbican into a vacant courtyard. Barred windows looked blankly down; and at the opposite end of the court a door stood mysteriously open, revealing a dark hall. As he approached the doorway, he saw that a man was standing on the threshold; though a moment previous he could have sworn that it was untenanted by any visible form.

Gerard had retained his hornbeam staff; and though his reason told him that such a weapon was futile against any supernatural foe, some obscure instinct prompted him to clasp it valiantly as he neared the waiting figure on the sill.

The man was inordinately tall and cadaverous, and was dressed in black garments of a superannuate mode. His lips were strangely red, amid his bluish beard and the mortuary whiteness of his face. They were like the lips of the woman who, with her assailants, had disappeared in a manner so dubious when Gerard had approached them. His eyes were pale and luminous as marsh-light; and Gerard shuddered at his gaze and at the cold, ironic smile of his scarlet lips, that seemed to reserve a world of secrets all too dreadful and hideous to be disclosed.

"I am the Sieur du Malinbois," the man announced. His tones were both unctuous and hollow, and served to increase the repugnance felt by the young troubadour. And when his lips parted, Gerard had a glimpse of teeth that were unnaturally small and were pointed like the fangs of some fierce animal.

"Fortune has willed that you should become my guest," the man went on. "The hospitality which I can proffer you is rough and inadequate, and it may be that you will find my abode a trifle dismal. But at least I can assure you of a welcome no less ready than sincere."

"I thank you for your kind offer," said Gerard. "But I have an

appointment with a friend; and I seem in some unaccountable manner to have lost my way. I should be profoundly grateful if you would direct me toward Vyones. There should be a path not far from here; and I have been so stupid as to stray from it."

The words rang empty and hopeless in his own ears even as he uttered them; and the name that his strange host had given — the Sieur du Malinbois — was haunting his mind like the funeral accents of a knell; though he could not recall at that moment the macabre and spectral ideas which the name tended to evoke.

"Unfortunately, there are no paths from my chateau to Vyones," the stranger replied. "As for your rendezvous, it will be kept in another manner, at another place, than the one appointed. I must therefore insist that you accept my hospitality. Enter, I pray; but leave your hornbeam staff at the door. You will have no need of it any longer."

Gerard thought that he made a move of distaste and aversion with his over-red lips as he spoke the last sentences; and that his eyes lingered on the staff with an obscure apprehensiveness. And the strange emphasis of his words and demeanor served to awaken other fantasmal and macabre thoughts in Gerard's brain; though he could not formulate them fully till afterward. And somehow he was prompted to retain the weapon, no matter how useless it might be against an enemy of spectral or diabolic nature. So he said:

"I must crave your indulgence if I retain the staff. I have made a vow to carry it with me, in my right hand or never beyond arm's reach, till I have slain two vipers."

"That is a queer vow," rejoined his host. "However, bring it with you if you like. It is of no matter to me if you choose to encumber yourself with a wooden stick."

He turned abruptly, motioning Gerard to follow him. The troubadour obeyed unwillingly, with one rearward glance at the vacant heavens and the empty courtyard. He saw with no great surprise that a sudden and furtive darkness had closed in upon the chateau without moon or star, as if it had been merely waiting for him to enter before it descended. It was thick as the folds of a serecloth, it was airless and stifling like the gloom of a sepulcher that has been sealed for ages; and Gerard was aware of a veritable oppression, a corporeal and psychic difficulty in breathing, as he crossed the threshold.

He saw that cressets were now burning in the dim hall to which his host had admitted him; though he had not perceived the time and agency of

their lighting. The illumination they afforded was singularly vague and indistinct, and the thronging shadows of the hall were unexplainably numerous, and moved with a mysterious disquiet; though the flames themselves were still as tapers that burn for the dead in a windless vault.

At the end of the passage, the Sieur du Malinbois flung open a heavy door of dark and somber wood. Beyond, in what was plainly the eating-room of the chateau, several people were seated about a long table by the light of cressets no less dreary and dismal than those in the hall. In the strange, uncertain glow, their faces were touched with a gloomy dubiety, with a lurid distortion; and it seemed to Gerard that shadows hardly distinguishable from the figures were gathered around the board. But nevertheless he recognized the assembled company at a glance, with an overpowering shock of astonishment.

At one end of the board, there sat the woman in emerald green who had vanished in so doubtful a fashion amid the pines when Gerard answered her call for succor. At one side, looking very pale and forlorn and frightened, was Fleurette Cochin. At the lower end reserved for retainers and inferiors, there sat the maid and the man-servant who had accompanied Fleurette to her rendezvous with Gerard.

The Sieur du Malinbois turned to the troubadour with a smile of sardonic amusement.

"I believe you have already met every one assembled," he observed. "But you have not yet been formally presented to my, Agathe, who is presiding over the board. Agathe, I bring to you Gerard de l'Automne, a young troubadour of much note and merit."

The woman nodded slightly, without speaking, and pointed to a chair opposite Fleurette. Gerard seated himself, and the Sieur du Malinbois assumed according to feudal custom a place at the head of the table beside his wife.

Now, for the first time, Gerard noticed that there were servitors who came and went in the room, setting upon the table various wines and viands. The servitors were preternaturally swift and noiseless, and somehow it was very difficult to be sure of their precise features or their costumes. They seemed to walk in an adumbration of sinister insoluble twilight. But the troubadour was disturbed by a feeling that they resembled the swart demoniac russians who had disappeared together with the woman in green when he approached them.

The meal that ensued was a weird and funeral affair. A sense of insuperable constraint, of smothering horror and hideous oppression, was upon Gerard; and though he wanted to ask Fleurette a hundred questions,

and also demand an explanation of sundry matters from his host and hostess, he was totally unable to frame the words or to utter them. He could only look at Fleurette, and read in her eyes a duplication of his own helpless bewilderment and nightmare thralldom. Nothing was said by the Sieur du Malinbois and his lady, who were exchanging glances of a secret and baleful intelligence all through the meal; and Fleurette's maid and man-servant were obviously paralyzed by terror, like birds beneath the hypnotic gaze of deadly serpents.

The foods were rich and of strange savor; and the wines were fabulously old, and seemed to retain in their topaz or violet depths the unextinguished fire of buried centuries. But Gerard and Fleurette could barely touch them; and they saw that the Sieur du Malinbois and his lady did not eat or drink at all. The gloom of the chamber deepened; the servitors became more furtive and spectral in their movements; the stifling air was laden with unformulable menace, was constrained by the spell of a lack and lethal necromancy. Above the aromas of the rare foods, the bouquets of the antique wines, there crept forth the choking mustiness of hidden vaults and embalmed centuriel corruption, together with the ghostly spice of a strange perfume that seemed to emanate from the person of the chatelaine. And now Gerard was remembering many tales from the legendry of Averoigne, which he had heard and disregarded; was recalling the story of a Sieur du Malinbois and his lady, the last of the name and the most evil, who had been buried somewhere in this forest hundreds of years ago; and whose tomb was shunned by the peasantry since they were said to continue their sorceries even in death. He wondered what influence had bedrugged his memory, that he had not recalled it wholly when he had first heard the name. And he was remembering other things and other stories, all of which confirmed his instinctive belief regarding the nature of the people into whose hands he had fallen. Also, he recalled a folklore superstition concerning the use to which a wooden stake can be put; and realized why the Sieur du Malinbois had shown a peculiar interest in the hornbeam staff. Gerard had laid the staff beside his chair when he sat down; and he was reassured to find that it had not vanished. Very quietly and unobtrusively, he placed his foot upon it.

The uncanny meal came to an end; and the host and his chatelaine rose.

"I shall now conduct you to your rooms," said the Sieur du Malinbois, including all of his guests in a dark, inscrutable glance. "Each of you can have a separate chamber, if you so desire; or Fleurette Cochin and her

maid Angelique can remain together; and the man-servant Raoul can sleep in the same room with Messire Gerard."

A preference for the latter procedure was voiced by Fleurette and the troubadour. The thought of unaccompanied solitude in that castle of timeless midnight and nameless mystery was abhorrent to an insupportable degree.

The four were now led to their respective chambers, on opposite sides of a hall whose length was but indeterminately revealed by the dismal lights. Fleurette and Gerard bade each other a dismayed and reluctant good-night beneath the constraining eye of their host. Their rendezvous was hardly the one which they had thought to keep; and both were overwhelmed by a supernatural situation amid whose dubious horrors and ineluctable sorceries they had somehow become involved. And no sooner had Gerard left Fleurette than he began to curse himself for a poltroon because he had not refused to part from her side; and he marvelled at the spell of drug-like involution that had bédrowsed all his faculties. It seemed that his will was not his own, but had been thrust down and throttled by an alien power.

The room assigned to Gerard and Raoul was furnished with a couch, and a great bed whose curtains were of antique fashion and fabric. It was lighted with tapers that had a funereal suggestion in their form, and which burned dully in an air that was stagnant with the mustiness of dead years.

"May you sleep soundly," said the Sieur du Malinbois. The smile that accompanied and followed the words was no less unpleasant than the oily and sepulchral tones in which they were uttered. The troubadour and the servant were conscious of profound relief when he went out and closed the leaden-clanging door. And their relief was hardly diminished even when they heard the click of a key in the lock.

Gerard was now inspecting the room; and he went to the one window, through whose small and deep-set panes he could see only the pressing darkness of a night that was veritably solid, as if the whole place were buried beneath the earth and were closed in by clinging mold. Then, with an access of unsmothered rage at his separation from Fleurette, he ran to the door and hurled himself against it, he beat upon it with his clenched fists, but in vain. Realizing his folly, and desisting at last, he turned to Raoul.

"Well, Raoul," he said, "what do you think of all this?"

Raoul crossed himself before he answered; and his face had assumed the visage of a mortal fear.

"I think, Messire," he finally replied, "that we have all been decoyed by a malefic sorcery; and that you, myself, the demoiselle Fleurette, and the maid Angelique, are all in deadly peril of both soul and body."

"That, also, is my thought." said Gerard. "And I believe it would be well that you and I should sleep only by turns; and that he who keeps vigil should retain in his hands my hornbeam staff, whose end I shall now sharpen with my dagger. I am sure that you know the manner in which it should be employed if there are any intruders; for if such should come, there would be no-doubt as to their character and their intentions. We are in a castle which has no legitimate existence, as the guests of people who have been dead, or supposedly dead, for more than two hundred years. And such people, when they stir abroad, are prone to habits which I need not specify."

"Yes, Messire." Raoul shuddered; but he watched the sharpening of the staff with considerable interest. Gerard whittled the hard wood to a lance-like point, and hid the shavings carefully. He even carved the outline of a little cross near the middle of the staff, thinking that this might increase its efficacy or save it from molestation. Then, with the staff in his hand, he sat down upon the bed, where he could survey the littén room from between the curtains.

"You can sleep first, Raoul." He indicated the couch, which was near the door.

The two conversed in a fitful manner for some minutes. After hearing Raoul's tale of how Fleurette, Angelique and himself had been led astray by the sobbing of a woman amid the pines, and had been unable to retrace their way, the troubadour changed the theme. And henceforth he spoke idly and of matters remote from his real preoccupations, to fight down his torturing concern for the safety of Fleurette. Suddenly he became aware that Raoul had ceased to reply; and saw that the servant had fallen asleep on the couch. At the same time an irresistible drowsiness surged upon Gerard himself in spite of all his volition, in spite of the eldritch terrors and forebodings that still murmured in his brain. He heard through his growing hebetude a whisper as of shadowy wings in the castle halls; he caught the sibilation of ominous voices, like those of familiars that respond to the summoning of wizards; and he seemed to hear, even in the vaults and towers and remote chambers, the tread of feet that were hurrying on malign and secret errands. But oblivion was around him like the meshes of a sable net; and it closed in relentlessly upon his troubled mind, and drowned the alarms of his agitated senses.

When Gerard awoke at length, the tapers had burned to their sockets; and a sad and sunless daylight was filtering through the window. The staff was still in his hand; and though his senses were still dull with the strange slumber that had drugged them, he felt that he was unharmed. But peering between the curtains, he saw that Raoul was lying mortally pale and lifeless on the couch, with the air and look of an exhausted moribund.

He crossed the room, and stopped above the servant. There was a small red wound on Raoul's neck; and his pulses were slow and feeble, like those of one who has lost a great amount of blood. His very appearance was withered and vein-drawn. And a phantom spice arose from the couch — a lingering wraith of the perfume worn by the chatelaine Agathe.

Gerard succeeded at last in arousing the man; but Raoul was very weak and drowsy. He could remember nothing of what had happened during the night; and his horror was pitiful to behold when he realized the truth.

"It will be your turn next, Messire," he cried. "These vampires mean to hold us here amid their unhallowed necromancies till they have drained us of our last drop of blood. Their spells are like mandragora or the sleepy sirups of Cathay; and no man can keep awake in their despite."

Gerard was trying the door; and somewhat to his surprise he found it unlocked. The departing vampire had been careless, in the lethargy of her repletion. The castle was very still; and it seemed to Gerard that the animating spirit of evil was now quiescent; that the shadowy wings of horror and malignity, the feet that had sped on baleful errands, the summoning sorcerers, the responding familiars, were all lulled in a temporary slumber.

He opened the door, he tiptoed along the deserted hall, and knocked at the portal of the chamber allotted to Fleurette and her maid. Fleurette, fully dressed, answered his knock immediately; and he caught her in his arms without a word, searching her wan face with a tender anxiety. Over her shoulder he could see the maid Angelique, who was sitting listlessly on the bed with a mark on her white neck similar to the wound that had been suffered by Raoul. He knew, even before Fleurette began to speak, that the nocturnal experiences of the demoiselle and her maid had been identical with those of himself and the man-servant.

While he tried to comfort Fleurette and reassure her, his thoughts were now busy with a rather curious problem. No one was abroad in the castle; and it was more than probable that the Sieur du Malinbois and his lady were both asleep after the nocturnal feast which they had undoubtedly enjoyed. Gerard pictured to himself the place and the fashion of their slumber; and he grew even more reflective as certain possibilities occurred to him.

"Be of good cheer, sweetheart," he said to Fleurette. "It is in my mind that we may soon escape from this abominable mesh of enchantments. But I must leave you for a little and speak again with Raoul, whose help I shall require in a certain matter."

He went back to his own chamber. The man-servant was sitting on the couch and was crossing himself feebly and muttering prayers with a faint, hollow voice.

"Raoul," said the troubadour a little sternly, "you must gather all your strength and come with me. Amid the gloomy walls that surround us, the somber ancient halls, the high towers and the heavy bastions, there is but one thing that veritably exists; and all the rest is a fabric of illusion. We must find the reality whereof I speak, and deal with it like true and valiant Christians. Come, we will now search the castle ere the lord and chatelaine shall awaken from their vampire lethargy."

He led the way along the devious corridors with a swiftness that betokened much forethought. He had reconstructed in his mind the hoary pile of battlements and turrets as he had seen them on the previous day; and he felt that the great donjon, being the center and stronghold of the edifice, might well be the place which he sought. With the sharpened staff in his hand, with Raoul lagging bloodlessly at his heels, he passed the doors of many secret rooms, the many windows that gave on the blindness of an inner court, and came at last to the lower story of the donjon-keep.

It was a large, bare room, entirely built of stone, and illumined only by narrow slits high up in the wall, that had been designed for the use of archers. The place was very dim; but Gerard could see the glimmering outlines of an object not ordinarily to be looked for in such a situation, that arose from the middle of the floor. It was a tomb of marble; and stepping nearer, he saw that it was strangely weather-worn and was blotched by lichens of gray and yellow, such as flourish only within access of the sun. The slab that covered it was doubly broad and massive, and would require the full strength of two men to lift.

Raoul was staring stupidly at the tomb. "What now, Messire?" he queried.

"You and I, Raoul, are about to intrude upon the bedchamber of our host and hostess."

At his direction, Raoul seized one end of the slab; and he himself took the other. With a mighty effort that strained their bones and sinews to the cracking-point, they sought to remove it; but the slab hardly stirred. At length, by grasping the same end in unison, they were able to tilt the slab;

and it slid away and dropped to the floor with a thunderous crash. Within, there were two open coffins, one of which contained the Sieur Hugh du Malinbois and the other his lady Agathe. Both of them appeared to be slumbering peacefully as infants; a look of tranquil evil, of pacified malignity, was imprinted upon their features; and their lips were dyed with a fresher scarlet than before.

Without hesitation or delay, Gerard plunged the lance-like end of his staff into the bosom of the Sieur du Malinbois. The body crumbled as if it were wrought of ashes kneaded and painted to a human semblance; and a slight odor as of age-old corruption arose to the nostrils of Gerard. Then the troubadour pierced in like manner the bosom of the chatelaine. And simultaneously with her dissolution, the walls and floor of the donjon seemed to dissolve like a sullen vapor, they rolled away on every side with a shock as of unheard thunder. With a sense of indescribable vertigo and confusion Gerard and Raoul saw the whole chateau had vanished like the towers and battlements of a bygone storm; that the dead lake and its rotting shores no longer offered their malefical illusion to the eye. They were standing in a forest-glade, in the full unshadowed light of the afternoon sun; and all that remained of the dismal castle was the lichen-mantled tomb that stood open beside them. Fleurette and her maid were a little distance away; and Gerard ran to the mercer's daughter and took her in his arms. She was dazed with wonderment, like one who emerges from the night-long labyrinth of an evil dream, and finds that all is well.

"I think, sweetheart," said Gerard, "that our next rendezvous will not be interrupted by the Sieur du Malinbois and his chatelaine."

But Fleurette was still bemused with wonder, and could only answer him with a kiss.



THE MYSTERY IN ACATLAN

by Rachael Marshall & Maverick Terrell

Were RACHAEL MARSHALL & MAVERICK TERRELL acquaintances or friends who found that they shared a love of that unique magazine, *WEIRD TALES*? Did one or the other dream up an idea that would make, they hoped, a good story for their favorite publication, or perhaps had one of them heard it from a traveler, etc.? Was this their first collaboration? Was it their last? All these questions, and more remain unanswered; there is only the single appearance of these two names in the entire run of the magazine, and neither name appears in the other imaginative fiction journals of the times — that is, the all science-fiction, or the all weird fiction titles.

IT WAS IN THE EXPLORERS' CLUB that I first noticed the expression in Harvey Larrison's eyes when Anthony's dog came in. Larrison did not move; there was a barely perceptible pause between the puffs of his pipe; yet for a moment, before he could clamp down on his nerves, fear looked out of them — stark, staring fear, almost instantly controlled. The dog was an unusually handsome one and he went the rounds of seeking pats and praise and getting them, including Larrison's. No one else had noticed the betraying flush in Larrison's eyes. Had it been

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in anyone else it would not have been so noticeable, but Harvey Larrison had a reputation for daredeviltry unequaled even in our Explorers' Club, whose members are never what one might call cautious people. I began to remember tales about Larrison, even an unpleasant hint since his return from his last trip somewhere on the ends of the earth.

"Thought you liked dogs," I said later in the evening when Anthony and his dog had left.

Larrison eyed me with surprise. "I do," he said. "I have always been extremely fond of them, all kinds. In fact I see very little difference between them and man, except that caused by a few eons' difference in evolution."

"You looked at Ted's dog queerly," I persisted. He did not deny it.

"I had a curious experience once," he said. "It has made me feel different about dogs."

I had had the luck to catch him in the mood, to get him started on the story which would explain that curious flash.

"It was in Acatlan it happened," he said slowly. "A terrible country, Acatlan, enormous, savage, half a million years behind the rest of the world. Anything could happen there."

"Seems that way," said Dr. McGonigal from out of the shadows beside the great library fireplace where we were gathered against the harshness of a cold and stormy night.

"Yes, you've been there too, haven't you?" Larrison said.

"Three years," said the big Scotch doctor laconically.

"Anything might happen there, in Acatlan," repeated Larrison. "I have never explained this thing. There is no explanation," he continued, "except one, and that, of course, is ridiculous, impossible. Or is it, in Acatlan?"

He looked over at the doctor, who merely crossed his legs anew and muttered something unintelligible into his pipe.

"I was lounging in the railroad pueblo of Cuernavaca," continued Larrison, "waiting for my man Pablo to turn up with a wheel part which I had ordered rushed out by express. It was too hot to go down to the station, even at 10 o'clock in the morning, so I sat under an awning eating Cordovan pineapple. There is nothing in all the world so pleasant to eat as Cordovan pineapple. They grow ripe on the plant, and one cuts them in two and eats them with a spoon — sweet, ice-cold and fragrant as a field of flowers.

"There was the usual crowd hanging about, or passing to and fro: water carriers, leche camada venders, blue Indians — so called because of the blue

blankets they weave and which constitute their sole costume, a piece cut off the end for a girdle, a hole in the middle to put their heads through and the piece out of the hole tied niftily on their heads for a hat — white-clad peons, naked children, a woman or two in the usual soiled chemise pounding corn for tortillas; white adobe glaring in the sun, blue shadows, and unbelievable greens, and somewhere in the distance the interminable music of a danza played on strings that seemed to drip with melody. Above the village towered the frowning vastness of the mountains. Strange tales are told of those mountains. Dunsany must have had some such tremendous ravines and mist-curtained valleys in mind when he wrote of 'the gods who dwell in the folds of the hills.' It is impossible to look up to those mountains and not feel awe, reverence, even a little cold fear along one's spine. They seem to be guarding with utter indifference and relentlessness the last withdrawing place of ancient gods dealing in ancient and sometimes terrible laws.

"Along the sun-checkered, cobbled street I saw a dog coming. It passed quite close to me and suddenly turned and gazed at me with its brown, unhappy eyes. That is what first attracted me to the dog: Its unhappy, beseeching eyes bewildered with pain and fear and yet holding somehow to a dumb, blind hope. I like dogs, even Mexican ones, which is the very limit of affection. And because the dog seemed so miserable I smiled at it, as one would smile at a person; an unusual thing to do, I admit, but I smiled in response to those eyes, seeking so desperately for a friend.

"The dog hesitated and looked back over its shoulder. It was a slender little beast, hardly more than a puppy, dark and smooth of coat. Just above one corner of its mouth was a scar — a small, deep wound which had healed but which drew the mouth up into an odd, whimsical quirk. As it came over in answer to my invitation I saw that its back, beneath the soft coat, was welted across and across with scars of the lash. Then all of a sudden as I patted it, swearing to myself at the brute who had tortured it, such a look of utter fear leaped into its eyes as I do not like to think of. It moved its muzzle sideways, as though looking desperately for a way to escape, then again it turned to me. I threw over the dog the rubber poncho which I had folded over my arm, to conceal it from whatever or whoever it was it feared, and turned to see what the dog had seen.

"He came out of the only restaurant — a fat, sleek man with black drooping mustaches over a hard mouth. His shirt was open halfway down his hairy chest, and his velvet pants were trimmed with rows of silver buttons, and a gay serape hung over his shoulder. I recognized the marks

of Mexican wealth; some ranchero probably, or a robber from the hills. He sauntered complacently by, picking his teeth, and cast a lackluster eye in my direction. Evidently seeing nothing to interest him, he passed on down the street and around the corner.

"Unconsciously I heaved a sigh of relief when he was out of sight; I hardly know why, unless it was because he was one of those persons whom one instantly dislikes. However, when Pablo cantered up with the wheel part strapped behind his saddle-bags," Garrison continued, "and I mounted and followed him, the little dog trotted along beside me.

"I was working on the railroad some thirty miles from the town, and it was late afternoon when we arrived at the camp.

"I went to my house, changed my clothes and went on up to the office, which was at the camp proper, a half-mile away. I forgot all about the little dog, which I had left asleep on a rug in my rooms. Work had piled up in my absence and I stayed at my desk until nearly 11 that night. Then I knocked off work, and decided to have a bite and turn in.

"I had inherited a pretty decent place from the engineer who had preceded me, and left on account of his health. It was a rambling old hacienda, long since deserted. He had only furnished one end of it, a high-ceilinged living-room with a tiled floor, a bedroom and a kitchen. He had had a fireplace built in of stone and adobe, for the evening chill pours down from the mountains like so much water. A fire was burning as I entered, and the room looked unusually attractive, almost home-like; I had accumulated a lot of blankets and Indian stuff and had some books sent out to me, and these had been dusted and rearranged. I supposed McCormack had dropped in, though I had not heard him mention any such intentions, and had made himself comfortable. Someone was sitting in the big armchair and moved in answer to my greeting but made no reply. I glanced at the chair and nearly dropped in my tracks, for there sat a girl, a young thing, hardly more than a child, staring at me with big, frightened brown eyes. I don't know exactly why, but I thought instantly of the dog, and looked for him where I had left him asleep on the hearth-rug. He wasn't there."

"Hello," I said to the girl, as casually as I could, "where did you come from?"

"She said nothing, but got slowly to her feet; rather bewildered and half frightened she seemed.

"You — you live here?" she asked in a very pure, upper-class Spanish.

"That was my impression," I replied.

"A moment more she stared at me — a long, somber look that seemed to be trying to read my inmost depths, and then she smiled.

"I very glad," she said, this time in halting English. "I make fire for you." The light struck full on her as she came forward, and I was amazed at her gentle, delicate beauty, more of a child than of a woman. Oddly enough a small scar drew up one corner of her mouth into a whimsical sort of twist.

"She took my hat from my hands and hung it up; she drew the chair toward the fire; then went and got my slippers from where I had left them under the table and set them by the fire.

"If you will seat down," she said timidly, "I will take off the shoe. Then I weel make the coffee. I make ver' good coffee."

"I sat down because I didn't know what else to do, but she seemed to take the situation as a matter of course.

"She took off my shoes, unlacing them deftly and quickly, and thrust my feet into the slippers. One of them had a rent in the toe.

"Tonight I will mend that," she said.

"But look here," I burst out, "you can't stay here, you know!"

"She looked up at me, sitting back on her heels, and her eyes filled with tears.

"Please you not send me away! I be good to you! I make cook, I make fire, I mend clothes, I do everyt'ing—"

"Who told you I wanted a — a servant?" I asked. It seemed hard to connect the word with her delicate beauty. "I never said such a—"

"She burst into tears and flung herself down on the rug, sobbing so that her whole frame trembled. She crept toward me along the floor and clung about my knees sobbing. Her hair fell all about her face, and as she looked up at me, her beseeching eyes half veiled by its tangles, I again thought of the dog. Nowhere else had I seen such an expression of longing, of unreasoning despair and terror.

"You no send me back," she begged. "You no send me back — to him — he so cruel — he beat me so. No! no! you no send me back — please — please!"

"Words dissolved into sobs; her little brown hands clutched me; her tangled brown head dropped upon my knee. One shoulder of the loose garment she wore slipped back and down, and I saw across her back innumerable scars of the lash.

"Pity engulfed me, even while, for some undefined reason, a little cold chill ran down my spine. Gently I put my hands about her and lifted her up. She seemed such a child, a helpless, frightened child to whom someone

had been unbelievably cruel, even for that land of cruelty. She collapsed on my lap and buried her face on my shoulder, her slender little body so racked with sobbing that it seemed almost as if it might break under the violence of her grief. I soothed her the best way I could; though it's little enough I know about children.

"Don't be afraid, *pobrecita*," I said. "I won't send you back if you don't want to go. No one is going to hurt you any more."

"Instantly her sobs stopped and her eyes smiled up at me, all wet with tears.

"I know you are good," she said. "I know I make no mistake. I weel repay you. I weel work for you." Her instant faith was overwhelming.

"While I sat wondering how on earth I was going to get out of the position in which I had just put myself, she slipped away and went into the kitchen. Soon she returned and drew up the small table near the fire and served me a deliciously cooked meal, which she must have had already prepared and keeping hot, and fragrant, perfectly made coffee. But to all questions as to who she was and where she came from she returned one answer.

"But I do not know, *Senor*. I am here. It has always been like that."

"When she was questioned closer, a bewildered look came into her eyes and she seemed frightened. I saw that she really did not know who she was, other than that the man to whom she referred occasionally called her Chulita, when he didn't happen to be swearing at her. From her references to him I believed him to be her father. She said he was fat and had big black mustaches. There were many blanks in her story, and always she spoke of 'that night,' or 'the night when.' It was a week before I discovered that she had never seen daylight, and did not know that the world ever looked other than dark, or moonlit. She supplied all lapses by saying, 'It must have been while I sleep.' It seemed she slept during the day time, or entered some sort of comatose state of which she retained no slightest memory. Otherwise she seemed perfectly normal."

"Ay!" muttered the doctor, looking more than he said. Our guest went right on with his strange tale.

"I was in a quandry," Larrison said. "What on earth could I do with her? To be sure, she was 'only a Mexican' but youth and beauty and a child's delicate innocence, such as seemed to be hers, must be shielded regardless of such matters as nationalities.

"There was not a woman in the camp, and only one other white man besides myself — McCormack, who had sometimes tramped up from the

camp to spend the night with me over Scotch and soda and cigars and memories of 'back home.' I was tired out from work and the long ride up from Cuernavaca, and I left the problem to the morrow and tumbled into bed and instant sleep.

"In the morning I found the room exquisitely clean and set in order, my torn slipper mended and hot food upon the fire, but of the girl there was no sign. No one was about except the little brown dog asleep upon the rug. She rose and came to me, fawning at my feet, looking up at me with brown eyes of adoration and gratitude, her mouth drawn up into a sort of one-sided smile by the scar. I patted her and pulled her ears, but somehow, in spite of myself, a suspicion of a chill ran down my back.

"However, as I plunged into the routine of work, surrounded by noise and the matter-of-factness of everyday affairs, the breath of superstition passed away. The dog followed me about the yard or lay asleep in the sun in my office. I told McCormack about the girl and he was highly amused, the more so because of my seriousness.

"'If she followed you up from Cuernavaca it's because she likes you,' he said.

"'But she didn't follow me up,' I expostulated. 'There was no one at all on the road.'

"'These Indians have trails of their own,' he said. 'No white man can follow them. What the 'ell! Take the goods the gods send you and forget it.'

"'But she's so infernally young!' I exclaimed.

"'Yeh,' said McCormack, 'better leave your watch with me. Them young, innocent kind's usually the worst. Besides, what else can you do with her away out here anyway?'

"And what else could I do with her? Send her back to be beaten by that fat scoundrel? At least she was safe and well cared for in my big place. Besides, she might go again, as mysteriously as she came.

"Toward sunset the dog roused herself from her sunny corner by my desk and scratched at the door. I let her out, somewhat impatiently, for I wanted to finish a letter before dark. An hour or two later I called for McCormack and invited him to spend the evening with me.

"The house was lit when we arrived, and there was a savory smell of cooking in the air. Chulita was there and served us a most delicious supper. The dog was nowhere in sight.

"'But there is no dog, Señor,' she said when I asked her. 'I have see no dog.'

"I hope she hasn't got lost,' I said.

"We spent a pleasant evening, smoking and talking, while Chulita sat quietly in a corner sewing buttons on my clothes. She seemed to have only one idea — to be of service to me.

"She's a winner," said McCormack as he turned in beside me later. "Some baby pup!"

"For some reason the old joke irritated me.

Several days passed. My house was cleaned as it had never been cleaned before. My lamps were always filled, my clothes mended and washed and pressed, my supper delightfully cooked and served. In the mornings there was no sign of Chulita. I never saw her in the daytime, and whatever she did about the house she evidently did at night or in the evenings before I came home from the office. I paid her a week's wages, but she left them untouched in a jug in the kitchen. She seemed to have no other wants than to look after my welfare, and no other pay but praise for her work. In all her attitude there was never a touch of coquetry. She was a child, a happy, inconsequential child, easily hurt, easily angered, easily pleased.

"I noticed after a while that I never saw the dog in the nighttime. In fact I never saw the dog and Chulita together. The dog always grew restless toward evening and would trot off into the woods, though I always found him asleep on the rug at home in the morning. Gradually the preposterous idea, which I had felt rather than thought, died away.

"Then one day I heard an unusual commotion in the yard and Pablo came in.

"There is an hombre out there who raise hell, Señor," he said. "He say you steal his dog."

I told Pablo to bring him in, and he returned with the fat man I had seen in Cuernavaca. He had even more silver buttons on his velvet pants and an even more gorgeous serape over his shoulder, and evidently a goodly lot of pulque under his large belt.

"I want my dog!" he exclaimed loudly. "You damn tief, you steal my dog."

"Is that your dog?" I asked, pointing to the little brown animal asleep in the sun.

A curious look lit up the Mexican's face; a shadow of fear crossed it, and greed and something else.

"Here you!" he snapped savagely, and the dog sprang to life, quivering and terrorized.

"Well, you can't have her," I said. "A man that treats a dog as you have treated that beast can't get any animal from me."

"But she's my dog!" began the Mexican.

"She may have been your dog, but she's mine now," I interrupted. "She followed me and I've had her three weeks. Just to keep your feelings from being hurt I'll pay for her. Here." I threw five dollars on the table.

"The Mexican's eyes blinked at the amount, but he drew himself up haughtily. 'I want no money,' he said. 'I want my dog. Come here, you.'

"The dog whined and crouched, cast me a look of entreaty and creeping over to me laid her head against my feet. The Mexican swore and kicked at it viciously with his spurred boot. He missed the full force of the blow, but the sharp spur tore a ragged line across the dog's shoulder.

"The ensuing combat was swift and to me extremely pleasant. After the Mexican had picked himself out of the dirt-pile in the yard in which he found himself he turned a face convulsed with rage toward me.

"I have you arrest!" he shrieked. "You steal my girl—I mean my dog. I have you arrest!"

"Clearly the man was drunk.

"Go to it," I remarked, flexing my arm. "Plenty more medicine where yours came from. She's my dog and she stays my dog; here's your money and that's all there is to it."

"He took himself off, grumbling and muttering threats under his breath.

"Bad business," said McCormack to me afterward. "Those people never forget. And the d—n dog isn't worth a nickel anyhow."

"Maybe not," I said, "but I like the little beast, somehow. It's so darn pathetic. And besides, it likes me." Which after all is probably half of why most of us like dogs. We enjoy the flattery of their devotion.

"I did not see the dog again that day, and I did not think particularly of the matter again, having company affairs upon my mind. But that night, as Chulita leaned over to serve me the *enchiladas*, her bodice slipped back from her shoulder and I saw a freshly made, jagged, red scar on her shoulder, as though a spur had struck across it. Somehow I found it difficult to finish my supper.

"Of course it was an accident, a coincidence. It was ridiculous to think anything else—worse than ridiculous. What strange notions came from staying up in these lonely, savage mountains! How I would laugh at myself for even dreaming remotely of such a possibility, once I was back in safe and sane, everyday New York. But insidiously the idea remained.

"Then another complication arose. I fell in love with Chulita. I tried to argue myself out of it, to reason and to shame myself out of it, without

avail. I could not get home early enough, it seemed to me, to the house which was a house no longer, but a home.

"As for Chulita, she, too, was changing. The haunted look left her eyes and a look of happiness succeeded it. The scars on her pretty back healed and faded. I still treated her as I would a child, a lovable and loving child, though more and more I felt toward her as toward a woman. And I thought she felt the same toward me. I surprised depths in her gaze, and once when our hands inadvertently touched I saw her tremble. I determined to marry her, and told McCormack so after one of his rude jokes which angered me.

"'Go ahead,' he said. 'Stick your head in the noose if you're determined to.'

"'Why shouldn't I marry her?' I demanded. 'She's as sweet as they come, and good, too. And she's a lady.'"

"'Where did she come from? What's her name? How do you know she ain't married already? What is she, anyway?' he demanded; to all of which I replied that I didn't know and didn't care.

"'Chulita, I love you. I'm not good at fancy speech, but will you marry me?' I asked her that night.

"She looked up at me with those great, fathomless brown eyes. 'I will do anything you want,' she replied. 'What is this, to marry?'

"'I love you,' I told her. 'I love you so much that I can't talk about it.'

"'Oh,' she sighed, resting her head against me. 'To love, I know what that is.'

"'Get ready,' I told her after a while. 'Tomorrow we will ride down to Cuernavaca and get the padre to marry us, and then you will belong to me for ever and for ever.'

"'Tomorrow,' she repeated. 'I will be ready.'

"We stayed out in the moonlight, sitting by the doorway under the jasmine vine until midnight, lovers for the first time. Then I got up and told her she must sleep.

"'We must start very early in the morning,' I said. 'It is a long ride.'

"I went to bed and heard her moving about the house until at last I fell asleep, happier than I had ever been or ever shall be in my life.

"In the morning when I got up there was no sign of Chulita, no one at all in the house but the little brown dog, asleep on the rug with a faded jasmine flower under her paw.

"Failing to find Chulita anywhere, I went to the office and spent the

day half-heartedly working, puzzled and unhappy. Why had she failed me? Had anything happened to her? Had perhaps that Mexican returned? Again the eerie thought crossed the edges of my mind, sending faint cold through all my veins—the thought of the strange impossible legend which one finds in every nation and told in every tongue, the legend of the loup-garou, the werewolf; that ridiculous tale believed by the Indians of a being under a curse and doomed to be human by day, or by night, and a dog or wolf for the other twelve hours.

"I looked down at the little dog I had rescued that day at Cuernavaca, the day of the same evening that Chulita had appeared in my house. The dog's deep brown eyes were fixed upon me with a look of sadness and utter devotion and its mouth was drawn up at one corner by the scar into a sort of a half smile—so like Chulita's, so terribly like! I shuddered, and even in the hot sunlight pouring through the window my hands felt cold and wet. The dog sighed profoundly and came over and laid her head heavily upon my feet.

"When I returned I found Chulita dressed for travel in one of the prettiest of the dresses I had sent out to her from Mexico City, some weeks before. She was so pretty and so sweet and eager that fears and cautions slid off my back like water from a duck's wing. We mounted and rode through the fragrant, moonlit night, down past mist-hung ravines where the perfumes of a thousand orchids enveloped us, down and downward and at last into moonlit, sleeping Cuernavaca.

"I roused the priest, and we were married in the dark little church. The priest's sister and a sleepy Mexican lad were witnesses. The civil ceremony would be attended to later. We went out of the church to where our horses stood, and just as we came around the stone buttress we ran into a Mexican. Heaven alone knows how he came there, by what evil chance he was abroad and passing at that hour and place. But there he was. In the clear moonlight I recognized instantly his great bulk, his evil eyes and drooping mustache. He snapped out a single word.

"Chulita turned and saw him and screamed. A knife flashed from his hand and I sprang at him.

"It was a long and bitter fight, for this time he had not been drinking and he had his full strength. I had him at last, and felt his body suddenly grow limp as his breath left him beneath my fingers. But he had me, too. The blood was pouring from a gash in my head and the world spun and went out as I collapsed.

"The stars were paling when I came to myself, still lying across the

body of the Mexican in the completely deserted street. Evidently no one had seen us or been near. The horses were still tied to the hitching-post. I staggered to my feet and looked about for Chulita. She was gone! There was no one there, nothing but the little brown dog lying dead in the moonlight with a Mexican knife through her heart. I never could find Chulita again, nor anyone who had seen her or any trace of her. There is no explanation, is there, Doctor? You've been out in lonely places, in Mexico; is there?"

Dr. McGonigal came out of his reverie.

"Er—no, Mr. Larrison, I canna say there is," he answered.

"Except of course unless," continued Larrison, "Unless—however, that way madness lies."

He rose, and soon, the storm having died down in the meantime, he left the club for his rooms.

The rest of us said nothing for a while.

Bob Wheeler spoke suddenly.

"Er, ah," he began, "didn't I hear somewhere that Larrison uses some form of dope?"

The doctor grunted.

I admitted that I had heard the same rumor.

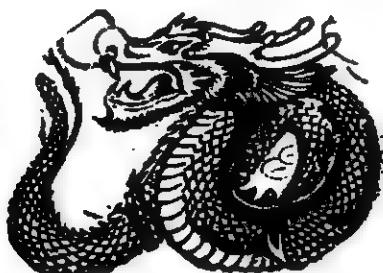
"Ay! Perhaps!" said the doctor, pulling on his greatcoat. "Godforsaken place, Acatlan. Gets a man, one way or another."

"That would explain a story like that," Wheeler went on.

Again the doctor grunted.

"Still," he said in his slow Scotch way as he pulled on his gloves, "I'm wondering, lads, which came first, the dope or the dog? Good-night, fellows."

The door closed after him.



IN THE LAIR OF THE SPACE MONSTERS

by Frank Belknap Long

(author of *The Brain-Eaters*, *The Space-Eaters*, etc.)

The temptation to change the title of this story was very strong, as not only is it misleading but I seriously doubt that it was FRANK BELKNAP LONG'S original title. When I first saw the title listed on the "In the Next Issue" page of the June, 1932 *STRANGE TALES*, my thought was that either Harry Bates had found a story by Mr. Long a little too weird for *ASTOUNDING STORIES*, or he was imitating Farnsworth Wright, who continually ran what he called "weird-scientific" stories in *WEIRD TALES*. So I expected a weird interplanetary tale something between the sort that Edmond Hamilton and Clark Ashton Smith contributed to *WT*. However, when I read it, I found, as you will find, that it just is not the story it seems to be at all — even though the illustration is reasonably accurate. You may believe that you can predict the next turn as you go along...well, I'd make a small wager that you're wrong. The author is telling a good story and having fun with formula at the same time.

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(illustration by Amos Sewall)

JIM HARVEY LAY UPON HIS BACK and stared in horror at the wet steel roof above him. Slowly, relentlessly it was descending. Water glistened on its smooth surface and dripped at intervals into his eyes. He could only guess at the submarine's precise position in the darkness, but he knew with certainty that something massive and substantial had collided with the craft and was riding it down, pressing down upon it, crushing in the almost indestructible walls and causing the entire structure to sway and vibrate.

Harvey was alone in a small compartment at the rear of the vessel. One part of the roof had collapsed completely and it spread level with the

floor, hemming him in. When he endeavored to extend his feet they at once encountered a closed surface.

Now even the steel above his head was succumbing to the pressure, was slowly sinking floorward. As it continued jerkily to descend a rigor passed through him, and his eyes became like those of a man in the throes of an epileptic convulsion.

"Oh, my God," he muttered helplessly, "what am I to do?" His hands went fumbling in the dark for something to seize upon. He was obsessed with the utterly insane notion that if he beat with a hard, metallic object on the rapidly collapsing roof he might, somehow, impede its descent. He had to do that, or go mad. It was of great and tragic consequence to him that the wrench with which he had been working when the collision occurred lay just beyond the reach of his fumbling fingers. His inability to recover it chilled his heart like ice. Without ceasing to grope for it he raised his left hand, and beat with his knuckles upon the unyielding steel. Faster and faster, in frantic despair. The blood pounded in his ears; his features were convulsed. If only, dear God, something would intervene to save him—

Suddenly the floor beneath him seemed to rise up, to tilt, and he felt his shoulders moving. For an instant he was spared dislodgment. Then, as the floor rose higher, his entire body was sent sprawling in a heap against the impassable impediment of the joined wall and ceiling. The submarine was plunging downward.

Down ... down. Harvey uttered a shrill scream and tried to straighten himself out. The submarine was sinking with unbelievable rapidity, as though it had been seized and taken in tow by some vast unknown entity in the outer darkness. A frightful cold seeped into the locked chamber, and as the descent continued the bolts and beams of the wrecked vessel began horribly to creak.

Harvey had a sense of falling through illimitable gulfs. The submarine seemed to be plunging irresponsibly down an inclined plane. So violent and rapid was the descent that it diminished the cold, and infused a curious warmth into the metal plates above Harvey's head.

He reached up and touched them. They were so heated they conveyed a sensation of burning. It was incredible. A shimmering heat had driven out the cold. Even his clothes were becoming moist and hot. His forehead was bathed in a steaming sweat.

Suddenly the vessel began to rock wildly. It pivoted to and fro, and careened and danced, like a cork in a bawling maelstrom. Its convulsions, frenetic and captainless, sent a swift, ominous rustling through the steamy

interior. The plates of steel were crackling and doubling up, surging inward in response to the terrific pressure.

But Harvey was no longer aware of what was taking place. He lay with his arms outthrust, his head thrown back. A stream of blood was trickling from the corner of his mouth, and his eyes, which had been opened on horror, were now closed in repose.

How long he lay thus, stunned and unconscious, he had no way of telling. He only knew that the period of darkness could not have been brief, for when he opened his eyes an extraordinary change had taken place in his surroundings. The compartment in which he lay was both luminous and stationary. A golden light had crept into it, burnishing the walls and causing the roof to shine with an eerie radiance. Yet it was no sunlight which greeted him. It was a denser glow, a thick, unnatural radiance which rested with an almost concrete ponderability on the objects which it illumined.

Harvey raised himself on his elbow and stared bewilderedly about him. The submarine was no longer moving. It lay upon its side, apparently, for the roof of the compartment was at first invisible to Harvey's gaze and the right wall supported his semi-prone body. Turning his head he could see the familiar plates of the roof lying, all crushed and battered, at his elbow. But what amazed him chiefly was the opening in the chamber. It was no longer sealed by the juxtaposition of wall and ceiling. The cohering surfaces had been pried or wedged apart, and a light streamed from between them. The unearthly illumination seemed to come from the torpedo room.

Harvey managed to bring his body erect. Every muscle, nerve and tendon ached and throbbed; but his fright and curiosity were so intense as to make him indifferent to physical suffering. His first thought was of his companions; he must discover if they were still alive, if they had survived the shock of the collision and descent. His face was set in grim lines as he crawled forward on his hands and knees. The light, when he neared the aperture, grew almost blinding, but so intent was he on what lay in the adjoining compartment that he ignored the glare. As he drew himself up and thrust his body through the narrow opening, jagged steel pressed in upon him, lacerating his shoulders and ripping the sleeves from his uniform.

But stubbornly, valiantly he pressed forward, wriggling his shoulders free and grasping with his hands a vertical girder in the torpedo room. A

moment later, he was standing erect beneath a blaze of light. The torpedo room was open to the air, a great jagged vent looming in the shattered steel of the ceiling and walls. But was it the sky which he saw? An amber orb, blinding, immense, glowed down at him from above, but if it was the sun, where was he and what had happened? Was he at the bottom of the sea, or dreaming, or mad, or dead?

He stared upward till his eyes could no longer endure the unnatural glare. Then, sick and shuddering with terror, he dropped his gaze to the floor of the torpedo room. His companions were dead. They lay about in grim, pathetic attitudes, Willis with his hand on a metallic pressure gage, Taylor and Andrews lying prone upon the floor, and young Johnny White with his back against a torpedo tube. It was tragically apparent that the shock of the descent, and an ensuing flow of deadly gases into the air-tight chamber had wrought a frightful havoc. Harvey knew that the remainder of the crew could not have survived the onrush of water in the upper chambers, and the ghastliness of his predicament sent a chill to his heart.

He gazed frantically about him, trying desperately to orientate himself to the strangeness of what he saw. Where was he and what had happened? Darkness and death were preferable to so hideous an enigma. He could not endure to stand there and speculate, to stand in that wrecked room amidst so vast an uncertainty, so vast a horror. The bodies of his companions were a taunt and a menace.

He looked hysterically about for something to climb upon. His one thought was to get out of the chamber, to emerge into the light which streamed down from above. But his strength seemed to have left him, and it was several seconds before he could move at all.

A low boiler was the most likely means of ascent which presented itself. That, and a swinging circle of wire which hung pendulous from a half-shattered girder above the torpedo tube. It occurred to him that if he could get his feet upon the latter he might be able to utilize it as a kind of trapeze, and swing himself upward by the sheer impetus of his undulating weight. By no other means could he hope to reach the jagged rent which yawned in the roof of the chamber. In the blind hope of reaching the light he was prepared to risk the fatal fall which would probably ensue. It would be better to join his companions on the floor of the chamber than to remain immersed in an uncertainty which unseated reason.

Slowly, painfully he clambered upon the box and stretched out his hand to grasp an end of the swinging wire. From somewhere below came

the ominous trickle of water. He had a sudden, insane impulse to shriek aloud, to break the silence with a shout or a curse. The light above him was so inexplicable, so blinding.

Keeping his eyes averted he pulled the wire downward and started to climb upon it. In order to get it between his feet, however, he was compelled to concentrate his gaze on a point level with the opposite wall, and while so doing he became suddenly conscious that a dark shape was slithering down its wet metallic surface.

Then a black tentacle had curled over the jagged opening above his head and was slowly descending into the chamber. In girth it was about the size of a man's arm, with small, luminous disks on its lateral surface, and it terminated in a hideous, claw-like appendage which opened and closed as Harvey stared at it.

Sickened, Harvey dropped the wire and descended to the floor. The thing was filthy beyond description and the mere sight of it sent him reeling to cover. He took refuge behind a coil of wire as it continued to descend, the claws opening and closing with a sickening greediness.

Harvey was not left long in doubt as to the object's purpose in entering the chamber. It was seeking prey. The claw went fumbling over the floor, feeling awkwardly about for something to seize on. In a moment it encountered the prone form of William Andrews, and stopped.

Harvey nearly screamed in revulsion at what followed. The claw tightened on Andrews' neck, tightened so viciously that the latter's tongue protruded in the most shocking manner. Then, with a jerk, the tentacle contracted and the body was wrenched upward out of sight. In a moment the claw had returned to the chamber and was feeling about for another victim.

Harvey pressed back against the metal plates in panic terror. One by one, before his horror-struck gaze, his companions were seized and wrenched upward. The malignant intruder did not always fasten on the necks of its victims. Taylor it seized about the ankles; young White it elevated by intangling its loathsome claws in the youth's matted hair. There was a lapse of nearly a minute before it returned for Harvey.

There wasn't much that Harvey could do, but he had the presence of mind, before the claw reached him, to extend a portion of his clothing rather than a portion of himself. The claw did not discriminate. It seized on Harvey's coat-sleeve with an insatiable greediness, and in a moment he was being jerked through the air toward the amber sun which oscillated like a kite in the firmament above him.

The tentacle deposited him on a hard, wet surface. For a moment his

eyes were blinded by the full glare of the new light and he saw only dark shapes through a mist — huge shapes that moved slowly backward and forward before his line of vision. Then, slowly, his sight improved, and he was able to make out the details of the rough, pitted surface of the cup-like depression in which he lay.

For several feet about him stretched a hard, black, granulated expanse of soil and rock, which glistened in the amber light, and which was pitted here and there with poxlike indentations from which moisture oozed. The circumambient soil was all of the same dark color, rough and level, but at a little distance from his body it rose to form the walls of a miniature crater. He was lying upon his back in the center of a small, craterlike depression and staring upward at a sky which shone with an unearthly radiance, an amber sky surmounted by an amber sun, and flecked, here and there, with clouds so densely black that they conveyed a sense of cosmic unreality, of hidden menace.

It was not the sky, however, that threatened his sanity, but the aberrant, hostile shapes which, surrounding the cavity in which he lay, menaced him with their waving tentacles and clawlike hands.

Only the claws and tentacles were clearly visible from where he lay, but dimly through the radiance which poured down on him from above he could discern the animating bodies behind these appendages. They were tall and vaguely anthropomorphic in outline — man-like bodies surmounted by faces whose luminous eyes glared down at him through the yellow glare.

Desperately he fought to keep their claws from piercing his clothes, struggled and pleaded and moaned, while they toyed with him, in insatiable curiosity. They turned him over, lifted him up, and with shrill, stridulous ululations examined his arms, his legs, the very garments which covered him. At last one of them, more persistent than its fellows, imbedded its claws in his hair and lifted him ruthlessly from the earth.

Agonizingly he was jerked into the air, and held aloft for the edification of his tormentors. Beneath the dazzling light he could see the creatures clearly, and his mind reeled at the abnormality of what he saw. From the waist upward they resembled men, albeit men of a simian and degraded caste, with hairy torsos, pointed ears and huge arms terminating in black, stubby hands. But in lieu of legs they supported themselves on eight squirming tentacles, which spread downward and outward from their thighs, branching as naturally and inevitably from their bodies as limbs in a

normally constituted being. So long were these tentacles that when the creatures caused them to straighten and used them to walk with, the body from which they depended was elevated twenty feet from the ground.

It was from one of these tentacular legs, gelatinous and noisome, that Harvey dangled. The creature had relinquished its hold upon his hair and twined its talons under his armpits, and was slowly waving him backward and forward.

There were eleven octopus-men in the group which surrounded him, and each held aloft in its claws one of his shipmates. Some of the dead men were suspended by their legs, others by the hair, and still others had been trussed up so grotesquely that they seemed half alive, their legs and arms moving in purblind animation as the grasp of their captors alternately relaxed and tightened on their shoulders and torsos.

In the bright glare the distraught and wan features of Frank Taylor stood out vividly. Taylor had been Harvey's comrade and confidant, but there was nothing reassuring now in his presence so near to the man whom he had known so well in life. So at least Harvey thought, suspended in agony in an alien world. Nothing reassuring about poor Taylor's face, with its shut eyes and gaping mouth. It was not until the tentacle which held

Taylor was brought to within a few feet of the tentacle which held Harvey that the latter perceived his mistake.

Taylor was not dead. He had opened his eyes and was staring in stark bewilderment at the man beside him. "Harvey!" he gasped. "Harvey, old fellow, in God's name, where are we?"

Harvey did not reply. He opened his mouth, but the words would not come. His tongue adhered too closely to the roof of his mouth; his will was too completely in abeyance. He could only stare and gesture, could only point and moan.

And now he was lifted higher, away from his friend. The octopus-men were moving. They had spread out in an orderly alignment, and were advancing over the pitted ground. The tentacle holding Harvey had ceased to wave. It surged stiffly forward, high above the earth; but by twisting and turning Harvey could see both the ground beneath and the mysterious sky with its dark clouds and coruscating sun.

The landscape through which he was moving was unearthly. The depression in which he had lain was merely one of many which pitted the ground as far as his gaze could penetrate. The entire landscape was composed of miniature sunken craters with brief stretches of smooth gray gravel between the hollows, and, save for the tininess of the depressions,

was unmistakably reminiscent of the lunar landscapes so vividly portrayed in the weird, imaginative paintings of Segrelles and John St. Clair.

The creatures moved unevenly over this strange terrain, now gliding with their claw-tipped tentacles down the sides of the craters, now surmounting the occasionally rather uneven rims by shifting from a vertical to an oblique posture, and frequently swaying so fantastically that the weight and position of their bodies seemed curiously at variance with the laws of gravity. Once the creature which was carrying Harvey lowered him in curiosity to within reach of its apelike hands and began to paw him. It was a nauseous, almost unbearable ordeal, but Harvey endured it without flinching.

He was intent on satisfying a curiosity of his own. So intense, indeed, was this impulse, that it banished fright. Avidly he scanned the horror's face, endeavoring in the few seconds vouchsafed to him to form some conception as to its intelligence and purpose. The eyes were small and red-rimmed, and stared down at him from a broad expanse of yellow and very wrinkled flesh. The cheeks were abnormally wide, the nose flat and sunken. The mouth was a straight slit in a chin which tapered grotesquely. The skin was soft and hairless, and the face, in its entirety, was very crudely analogous to that of an extremely wrinkled and vindictive old woman. Harvey was relieved when the tentacle jerked him upward out of sight of the thing's malevolent eyes.

The procession continued to advance. Harvey's throat was dry; his eyes ached and throbbed. When he turned his face upward the sun was a live coal on his forehead and eyes. Yet he could not bear to keep his gaze fastened on the earth. The craters were menacing, and their air of alien, primordial desolation appalled him.

He shut his eyes very tightly and tried to reason in the darkness. Something ghastly and unprecedented had happened to him and he was lost in a mad world. He had been projected into a world that was irrational, incredible, insane.

Taylor's voice cut sharply through the blackness, "Harvey — Harvey, I say. I'm here. Right beside you. Open your eyes, old fellow."

Jim Harvey obeyed instantly, and for a moment the two men stared at one another in silence. Then Taylor spoke.

"What do you suppose happened to the submarine, Jim? I lost consciousness, you know. Did you? Tell me, did you?"

"No," said Harvey.

"Then what happened?"

"I don't know."

"In God's name, Jim, tell me!" Taylor begged.

"I say I don't know. We hit something — a submerged hull, I guess — and the ship crumpled up. The 'tin' came down and almost crushed me. Then she sank. Sank like a hunk of lead. Faster and faster. I thought she'd never hit bottom. But she did, apparently, for the jolt knocked me senseless. When I came to the ship was open to the sky, and — "

"We're ashore somewhere, of course," interposed Taylor suddenly.

"I don't know."

"You don't know. Good God, man, we can't be at the bottom of the sea. Unless — unless we're dead!"

The tentacular arm which held Harvey was jerked suddenly upward, as though Harvey's captor disapproved of the conversation. Harvey could no longer see his friend, but he called out loudly: "We're not dead, Frank. And we're not at the bottom of the sea. We're farther down than that. Under the bottom!"

Harvey didn't see Taylor again until they passed into the forest. And then it was only for a moment, in a clearing between the trees. It was Taylor who spoke first.

"They won't spare us, Jim," he said, in a tremulous voice.

"I know, old chap," rejoined Harvey, grimly.

"They're not friendly."

"No."

Taylor burst out fiercely: "How can you take it so calmly, Jim?"

"I don't take it calmly. But we may as well face the inevitable without whining or cringing. We'll never see our world again. We've gone down a chute. A chute at the bottom of the sea."

"How do you know?" murmured Taylor.

"I'm not sure, of course, but it's the only explanation I can think of. It's preposterous to suppose we could have been washed ashore. No island on earth could contain vegetation like this and creatures like this. We're either dead, or else we're beneath the bottom of the sea. And I don't think we're dead. You, these animals — everything here is too real, too concrete and substantial. Death can't be like this. We're far down within the earth, Frank. There must be a great vent or abyss on the floor of the Pacific leading to this world. The submarine didn't sink. It fell or went down a chute. A chute envacuumed to keep out the water. An inclined plane leading downward. That's it. Don't you see?"

The octopus-man holding Taylor did not wait for the latter to reply. It lumbered forward through the trees, leaving Harvey to his speculations, while his own mount advanced at a more leisurely gait.

The forest was more hideous in its myriad convolutions than the crater-pitted plain over which they had passed. Great trees, so tall that they shut out the sun, spread upward and outward above the procession, and from low limbs and overhanging branches dark, gleaming reptiles hung in coils, hissing and moaning. Nature, or whatever it was that had usurped her functions in that abysmal place, had not fashioned the trees of wood, but of a soft, yielding substance which was almost indestructible. The octopus creatures advanced by twisting the interlacing branches upward and outward, and even, in the case of the smaller trees, by bending the boles adroitly to one side. Every tree and twig, every shred of vegetation in the forest, was fashioned of this same strange rubbery substance, and was infinitely compressible.

There was no snapping of twigs as that weird procession passed, no crunching, even, of the leaves on the forest floor. Even the domed and vermillion-hued fungi that sprouted so prolifically from the boles of the taller trees were compressible, plastic. No growth in the forest, apparently, was destructible. The tree, the flowers, the very vines could be pushed to one side, trampled upon, and twisted out of all semblance to their original shapes.

The journey through the forest was more interminable in its duration than the trip over the crater-pitted plain. Harvey's body was brushed and bruised by the rubbery vegetations and besoiled by the saliva which fell from the drooling mouths of the huge reptiles. The loathsome creatures were of a pale, yellowish hue save where, at intervals, vermillion rings encircled their python-thick bodies; and their flat heads and gaping jaws glistened. Not even their green, tooth-rimmed jaws, however, were as repulsive as the foul odor they exuded.

The octopus-men paid no attention to these creatures, but lumbered resolutely forward, holding their captives high above their heads and occasionally using them as battering rams to break down the massive walls of vegetation which impeded their progress. Only the dead men, however, were so used. Harvey and Taylor were spared this ignominy, as though their captors sensed that they were not likely to survive with fractured skulls.

There was growing up in Harvey's mind the conviction that he and Taylor were, in a sense, objects of especial solicitude on the part of their

captors. It was as though they had never seen a living man before, as though they were familiar only with the dead of his kind, as though dead men were familiar objects in their world while he and Taylor were awe-provoking anomalies.

He was not given much time, however, in which to ponder. For now the creatures were emerging from the forest and descending a steep, rock-dotted slope. The creatures were compelled to exert all their resourcefulness to maintain a footing on this steep incline. The tentacular legs advanced with caution, feeling their way fumblingly for temporary foot rests in the steeply shelving soil, and stopping from time to time to feel about and explore.

The octopus-men had covered nearly a hundred feet in their descent when the cavern came into view. It was a low rectangular opening in the gray, rock-strewn embankment and the creatures approached it with a hissing noise that snote ominously on Harvey's ear. His surprise and amazement were intense when these weird sounds were answered from within. The creatures now accelerated their descent, and in a moment were standing at the base of the aperture, swaying backward and forward as though reluctant to enter unannounced.

After a moment, however, they began to advance into the cavern, and it occurred to Harvey that their apparent hesitancy was in reality nothing more than a kind of mystical ritual which they felt impelled to perform, precisely as a Japanese would tarry to remove his shoes before the door of his dwelling, or a Moslem make obeisance at the entrance of a mosque.

The interior of the cavern was illuminated by an unearthly bluish glare which seemed to come from somewhere far within, and the actuality of its remoteness was confirmed as they advanced farther into the cave by the ever-increasing brilliance which rested on the floor, walls and roof. The cave was so low-roofed that the octopus creatures were compelled to bend back their bodies at right angles to their tentacular extremities, and to shorten the latter by twisting them into folds and spreading them over a wide expanse on the floor beneath.

The procession was a queer one, each octopus creature advancing slowly over the uneven ground, like so many cramped and distorted spiders crawling in slow sequence into the interior of their burrows. Twice Harvey was brought perilously close to the low-arching roof, and once a stalactite grazed his brow, causing him to wince in agony, while a stream of blood ran down his cheek and into his mouth. The entire roof of the cave was covered with stalactites. They glowed with an eerie radiance of

their own, a shivery glow which contrasted strangely with the colder, paler light of uncertain origin which furnished the dominant illumination.

It was several minutes before they came to the first of the side chambers. The cavern had narrowed and shelved, and Harvey was in such constant and deadly danger from the projecting stalactites that he almost failed to notice it. But when his captor had pulled and squeezed itself free from the cramping narrowness of the passage, at the particular point where this novel enclosure emerged into the main tunnel, and was floundering down an even steeper gradient, the meaning of what he had seen came to him with a terrible vividness, in actual physical retching. He had caught a glimpse, instantaneous, appalling, of a square, empty enclosure the size of a small room, with a floor that was smooth and polished and destitute of all embellishment. And on this burnished and blue-green floor, which mirrored the stalactites like a lake of glass, there reposed in loathsome disarray a hideous collection of white human bones.

The ensuing journey was a nightmare and a madness. Not one, but dozens of auxiliary chambers jutted off from the main cavern, and in each there rested human remains — gleaming, fleshless skullcaps, tibias, limb and jaw fragments. Harvey was frozen with terror. He lay rigid as a corpse. From far behind there came a man's shriek, prolonged, agonized, horrible. Harvey recognized the timbre of the voice, and a tremor passed over him. It was Taylor crying out in fright at what he saw, Taylor who was less stoical than his companion, less able to endure in silence the threat implicit in the fleshless bones.

But Harvey remained through it all keenly observant. He noticed that to a few of the bones adhered clothes, which invariably were of a dark texture, coarse garments bearing unmistakable evidences of prolonged wear. Brass buttons gleamed from several of these fragmentary garments, while on others were insignias in rusted gold and scarlet, insignias which Harvey recognized and shuddered at. On the floor of one cavern there reposed a circular cap, upturned, with peaked visor. The visor was corrugated and eaten away at the edges, but its maritime derivation was unmistakable.

There was little doubt in Harvey's mind as to the profession which the skeletons had pursued in the world of men. Though inured to the sea, they, too, had succumbed to the Pacific's dark treachery, had fallen through a vent in the bed of the ocean. For hundreds of years, perhaps, they had been descending in ships into an alien world through a vent at the

bottom of the ocean, which yawned to receive the living and the dead. No other explanation was tenable. The living and the dead. Or only the dead, perhaps. Drowned men, corpses. Harvey was a novelty in that world; the octopus-men regarded him with wonder, with awe. Perhaps he and Taylor alone of all men...

His captor had come to a sudden halt, standing very still in the blue light before an empty chamber. Harvey's gaze swept the enclosure in vague apprehension, which mounted to a shrill fright when the creature lowered its tentacles and deposited him in the center of the burnished floor. For an instant he relinquished hope. In the course of the journey past the dark chambers he had correlated his impressions and reduced them to some sort of meaning, and he was convinced that the creature intended to devour him.

But his captor had other plans. It simply deposited him in the center of the floor and retreated precipitously, with shrill utterances. Harvey was left alone in the vacant enclosure. For a moment he lay there prone, too stunned and frightened to move or cry out. His mind was in a turmoil; momentarily he expected that a claw would fasten on his throat, would dash out his brains. If the side chambers, with their gruesome relics, were not slaughter stations, what were they?

Harvey was not vouchsafed an immediate reply. He was simply left lying in the center of the chamber, whilst the octopus creature busied itself elsewhere. Even when he rose to a sitting posture and stared frantically about, no one interfered with him. It was only when he gained his feet and staggered, shakily, toward the central cavern that the octopus creatures reappeared. His original captor reappeared, and also several others. One of these, he perceived with horror, was holding the limp form of Taylor. Taylor had fainted.

The creatures bobbed about in the passage without and glared at Harvey with their small, red-rimmed eyes. When they saw that he was intent on emerging, one of them raised a tentacle and struck him a thud upon the chest which sent him sprawling. When he again raised himself his horror-struck gaze encountered an extraordinary sight. Taylor was lying prone upon the floor and one of the creatures was spraying him with a greenish fluid. This exudation drooled from the creature's mouth, a thick substance that descended in a stream on Taylor's extremities. Harvey did not immediately perceive the significance of what was taking place; he was too frightened.

But when one of the creatures seized him and began spraying him with the same sticky, evil-smelling liquid, he awoke to the seriousness of his

predicament. The creatures were gluing his arms and legs together so that he would be powerless to escape, powerless to so much as move about in the enclosure.

There was no doubt in Harvey's mind that the creatures intended to imprison him in the enclosure. The gluelike substance hardened almost instantly on his arms and legs and held them in a rigid vise. So acrid was the odor that surged from it that it half strangled the breath in his throat. But worst of all, he was not permitted to assume a natural posture, but was glued into a cramped and agonized attitude, and trussed up like a beetle in amber against the wall of the chamber.

Having deposited him against the wall the octopus creatures retreated to the main passageway, and stood for an instant silently gazing in at him, their small eyes glowing with malicious satisfaction. Then they withdrew, their places being taken after a moment, by others of their kind. For nearly an hour Harvey and Taylor, glued helplessly to the wall, were viewed and reviewed by the detestable creatures. With an insatiable curiosity they clustered about the entrance to the chamber and reveled in the sufferings and agony of their captive guest. They seemed to exude, beside the gluelike substance which dripped from their mouths, a malignancy, a hate so intense that it could actually be felt, as though it emanated in tangible vibrations from their bodies.

At last, when more than a hundred of the octopus-men had passed and repassed before the chamber, and the more agile and aggressive of the creatures, who seemed to exercise a kind of leadership, were showing evident signs of weariness, a change became evident in the proceedings. Five of the creatures congregated before the entrance and began, slowly, to make grotesque gestures in the air.

Harvey was not left long in doubt as to the meaning of their strange behavior. They were walling him up! Skillfully and with a hellish deliberation they drew out the exudation from their mouths and converted it into a finely meshed, cohesive web by the cooperative movements of five pairs of hands working in harmony with numberless tentacles. They wove the threadlike strands in and out among the tentacles, using the latter as looms, staples and shuttles, when the need arose, as it alternately did, for thicker and finer integuments. They worked with a spider-like precision and it was not long before a heavy veil spanned the entrance of the enclosure, dimming the radiance within and increasing Harvey's despair. The octopus creatures became dim shadow-shapes on a blue-lighted screen, vague distortions moving slowly backward and forward in the shifting light.

Then Taylor moved and spoke: "Is that you, Jim?"

Harvey started and turned about as far as his shackles would permit. The two men were trussed up side by side against a rock fissure with innumerable cutting protuberances. The octopus-men had done their work well. Not only were Harvey and his companion secured so tightly that they were powerless to struggle; they were virtually impaled against the wall, fastened by innumerable strands of gutty integument to the outcropping rocks and so placed that the slightest movement caused the most excruciating agony. But Harvey valiantly turned his head, ignoring the pain which wracked him.

"Yes, Frank?"

"I can't see very well. Where are we?"

"In one of the side caverns. You saw them?"

There was a moment of silence. Then a groan came from the man by Harvey's side.

"I saw them, yes. Oh, my God!"

"Get a grip on yourself, Frank," admonished Harvey. "We're still alive. That ought to mean something to you. We've been privileged beyond most of the poor devils who came here. I don't think the vile creatures ever saw a live man before."

"What do you suppose they walled us up in here for?" murmured Taylor.

"I don't know. But we've got to try to work ourselves free. It will be painful, I know, but we've got to try. As soon as they leave, Frank, we'll see what can be done."

"It's useless, Jim. I can't move at all. Unless they release us we're goners. What do you think they intend to do with us?"

Harvey smiled crookedly. "Do you know anything about social life among the insects, Jim?"

Taylor started. "Social life?"

"I mean, do you know what certain species of wasps and beetles do with the caterpillars they capture and sting into insensibility?"

The fear in Harvey's eyes belied the assumed levity of his tone, "Do you know what they do with the caterpillars, Jim?"

Taylor remained silent.

"They wall them up with clusters of new-laid eggs. Some species of wasps merely wall up the caterpillars and eggs together, and others go further, depositing the eggs on the body of the captive host. I don't think we'll find any eggs on our persons, but I'm not so confident about the rest of this cave."

"It's preposterous," mused Taylor, hoarsely. "They are not insects."

"No, but their social habits may be roughly analogous. Their web weaving, for instance, is spiderlike. You can't deny that. And who knows what instincts and habit patterns they may have acquired during millions of years of subterranean evolution? In our world social insects which spend most of their lives underground are cannibalistic, particularly in the rearing of their broods. Why is the comparison so fantastic, Jim? They've walled us up for a definite purpose."

"The cave is empty," affirmed Taylor, tremulously.

"I wish it were. That mound, over in the corner there...."

"I saw it. But surely you don't believe...."

"I don't like the looks of it, Frank."

"But it's solid earth, I tell you. A mere unevenness in the soil."

"No, Frank. You see it's—it's moving."

"I've been watching it. It started to move several minutes ago, while you were unconscious. I've been watching it continuously. There's something alive under that mound. I'm certain of it now. An instant ago, just before I called your attention to it, it heaved up. Just as though—well, it's impatient to get out, I guess."

"It isn't moving now," protested Taylor.

"Not at this moment. But keep your eyes on it and you'll see."

Taylor watched. Only his rapid breathing betrayed his agitation. After a moment, the breathing stopped, its cessation heralded by a short hiss. When Taylor spoke again there was a note of appeal in his voice:

"But I can't believe there's anything alive down there. An earth tremor...."

"No." Harvey was pitilessly firm. "It's too obvious. As soon as I saw what they intended to do with us, as soon as they started spinning, I began to suspect the truth. And when I saw that mound and saw it move—" He broke off, abruptly. Then, after a moment, "Those skeletons in the other chambers gave me an inkling of what to anticipate. I knew that these were feast stations. Only I thought—it was amusing—I thought we were destined for the adults. I flattered myself that we were destined for mature stomachs. Not—maggots."

"Cut it," groaned Taylor. "No sense in any kind of talk."

Harvey smiled wanly. "No sense in any kind of talk—now."

Taylor began violently to struggle. But only his back and shoulders were unconfined, and the more he moved the more terribly the rock projections cut through his garments, lacerating his flesh.

It is to Harvey's credit that he remained outwardly calm and immobile.

Even when the mound bubbled and heaved he did not cry out or attempt to move his limbs. He simply thrust forward his head and watched, with a consuming curiosity, the small shapes emerge from the soft loam, watched their globular heads sway backward and forward in the dimming light. They were moist and glistening greenish globes that expanded in girth till they sagged with an excess of fleshly tumescence and enveloped in balloonlike folds the repulsive and malignant faces beneath. Yet despite their bulging craniums the shapes were grotesquely small eight-inch caricatures of the larger monsters without, with faces so shriveled and deformed that the mere sight of them sent a chill to Harvey's heart. As he strained forward the sweat dripped from his forehead. The monsters beyond the blue-lighted partition were at least partially anthropomorphic; but in these tiny less mature faces adhered no kinship to humanity at all, no remote suggestion of anything but the fiendish and bestial.

They were savagely eager, an eagerness that, in a manner of speaking, was wholly dental. Their eyes were vacant, blind, and only their teeth-rimmed mouths were alive and prescient. These were puckered in an instinctive eagerness, a blind rage of hunger that clamored for appeasement.

One by one the creatures came from the broken earth and surged across the chamber on thin, transparent tentacles. And as they advanced their faces contracted even more menacingly, and their lips writhed upward from their razor-sharp teeth. Interminably they continued to appear, till the entire floor of the chamber was a squirming mass of translucent tentacles and dark hairy limbs. And presently the vanguard reached the ledge where Taylor and Harvey were confined and, clambering swiftly over the outcropping stones, swarmed upon the unfortunate men.

A surging fury of revulsion raced through Taylor's veins. At least fifteen of the things had climbed upon him, and their wet bodies were clinging tenaciously to his clothes and coiling about his shackled limbs. Their white, fishlike eyes stared sightlessly upward as they wriggled, and their acrid breath made him choke and gasp. Presently he heard an insatiable gnawing and the clashing of teeth all about him. The sound deafened him.

The creatures were viciously eating their way to his flesh, eating away both his clothes and the hardened exudation which covered them.

For a while these activies continued without abatement, and then—torture: excruciating torment in his flesh, piercing stabs of pain on his chest, shoulders and legs. Agonizingly he struggled to free himself from the merciless jaws that were snapping and tearing at his confined limbs.

He lashed about, and gradually as he squirmed the gutlike strands,

which had been loosened by the creatures' blind and insensate gnawing, began perceptibly to give way. They relaxed, broke, and the entire upper portion of his body sagged downward. Fiercely he continued to struggle, and in another moment his legs were also free, and he was sliding from the ledge.

Swiftly downward his body plunged, striking the earth with his tormentors. But no sooner was he on the ground than another score of the creatures leaped upon him and clawed at his lacerated flesh. When he endeavored to rise they pressed in so suffocatingly upon him that he was powerless to move. The whole chamber was aswarm with their writhing tentacles. It was an inferno, a seething carnival.

And then from out of the darkness above there came an outburst of insane laughter. In his effort to face the inevitable stoically Harvey had overtaxed his endurance, and his nerves were in revolt. High up on the ledge, above Taylor's head, he had begun horribly to laugh—mirth demoniac, rhythmic mad, the hideous cackling of a man in the last extremity of mortal fright.

And as the awful sound rose in volume and intensity there occurred an incident more mysterious than all the shapes and sounds of that unearthly world—a sudden quelling of the bestial orgy, a shifting of impulse in the voracious hordes. For the high-pitched, semi-rhythmic reverberations of Harvey's insane mirth appeared to generate a cataclysmic reaction in the swarms of larval octopi.

With spasmodic jerks they descended from the ledge and from Taylor's body, and formed into a phalanx in the center of the chamber. In haste they huddled together, as hypnotically responsive to the wild sound as were the rats of Hamelin to the pipings of the minstrel—oblivious to everything but their own frenzied cavortings. For an instant they went careening in a body about the chamber, clambering up the wall toward the ceiling and falling back upon the floor in a quivering swoon. Several times they repeated this wild, irrational dance, lying for an instant as though stunned, and then beginning again. Faster and faster, in a mad fury about the narrow enclosure. Faster and faster, in rhythmic dance, a whirling waltz, macabre, blind. Louder swelled the laughter of poor Harvey and wilder became the leapings and cavortings of the larval monsters, their mouths white with a drooling froth.

And suddenly they leaped upon the partition and began furiously to attack it with their teeth. Like a swarm of locusts they fell upon the confining web of exudation and gnawed and bit at it. Their jaws worked spasmodically, filling the cave with a crunching din. Backward and forward

over the web they moved, jostling one another in their fright. And presently a black hole yawned in the blue-lighted screen, and the larvae were swarming through it. And then another hole appeared, and another, till the entire partition was riddled, and the creatures streamed through each of the yawning vents. Gradually they vanished, and only the prone form of Taylor on the floor and the hysterical, screaming form of Harvey on the ledge remained in the chamber.

With a supreme effort the former got unsteadily to his feet, and blundered toward the ledge. His friend, free of his shackles, was clinging helplessly to the uneven projections, staring insanely at the opposite wall and laughing like a gorilla under torture. When Taylor reached out tremulously to steady and reassure him Harvey struck aside the proffered arm and shrieked horribly. All of Taylor's remonstrances were of no avail. Harvey drew himself up against the ledge and refused to descend. Taylor was compelled to climb up beside him and plead and struggle with him, and finally, in desperation, to strike him—a vicious blow upon the chin.

In another moment Taylor was dragging the unconscious form of his friend through the collapsed partition toward a luminous void. Out, in frantic haste, along a dark wide passage, up a steep incline and between narrow walls dripping with ooze. And to keep from going mad he too laughed as he advanced—shouted and laughed and wept.

When Harvey recovered consciousness he was lying upon his back and Taylor was kneeling beside him. The sky above his head was very blue; the sun shone with a warm and very earthly radiance. In instinctive bewilderment he put out his hand and felt the soil upon which he was lying. It was sandy soil, moist and soft.

Taylor was staring at him solicitously. "I hope you're all right, old fellow. It was a nasty blow I gave you, but I had to do it. You were hysterical—helpless."

Harvey groaned, raising himself on his elbow. "I feel a little dizzy," he murmured. "I don't know—I don't know where I am. Weren't we in—a cave? I seem to recall a cave. It's all so confused. Something terrible...."

"Steady, Jim. You'll be all right in a moment. We were in a cave. The octopus people—remember? They walled us up."

Harvey's face contracted spasmodically, and in a moment he was trembling. "I remember," he murmured. "The submarine, the vent—oh, my God!" He sprang to his feet and stared wildly about him. Then quickly, with an agility that was appalling, he began racing about, staring up in bewilderment at the luxuriant foliage of the coco palms, and peering

with incredulous eyes at the heavens flecked by white normal clouds and the long white beach that sloped in a steep gradient to the sun-reddened ocean.

He was faint with excitement when he came back to where Taylor was kneeling above the ashes of an extinguished fire. "A dream, then?" he murmured, sinking to his knees.

"No," Taylor shook his head. "I don't think so."

"But how did we get here?"

"I don't know precisely how. I broke through the wall and dragged you out into the main passage. I remember doing that. And then—everything dissolved. I mean just that. The cave, the stalactites, everything."

"And the submarine."

"It's on the other side of the island. It's all battered in, twisted, smashed. We were caught up in a tidal wave, Jim, and cast on this island. That accounts for the sensation we had of falling through space. After the smash—you understand? It's my guess we had a collision first. The S-87's a hundred yards from the shore. It must have been a frightful cataclysm. The island's practically washed out over there."

"But the cave, the octopus people?"

"I don't know where they are. They're right beside us, perhaps, in another dimension."

"Another dimension?"

"Yes. That's what I've been thinking. It's much less hard to believe than that we fell through a hole at the bottom of the sea. Besides, we didn't. We know now that we didn't. I'm not much of a bookworm, but I've read something of what modern scientists are thinking nowadays about the fourth dimension, and it's my guess that we're very near to it, that there's another world impinging—I think that's the word they use—impinging on this island. By some crazy mischance we stumbled into it. Or rather, the S-87 was immersed in it. Now it's passed. You understand. We stumbled out of it, escaped from it. A misstep and we may get back into it again. It may be lying very close to us. It apparently moves about, for the submarine is now in our world. But it may come back and immerse the submarine and us. You know what the books say, the books that have to do with such matters. I can remember one passage almost word for word: 'Above the familiar seas and islands of the world there lie other invisible islands and seas, fourth-dimensional islands and seas, peopled by strange and horrible creatures unlike anything with which we are familiar.' Those sailors—the skeletons in the cave—were lost like us. Castaways. The other world broke through and engulfed them."

Harvey was nodding excitedly. "I think you've hit it," he murmured. "But if it's true, if it's really true, we're still in danger."

"Chances are," continued Taylor, "we're safe for the present. But it may come back before we can get away. I've been hoping and praying that we'll be picked up before anything like that happens. See that sail?" Taylor gestured toward the sea. "I've been watching it for an hour. I even lit a fire to attract it. But it doesn't come any nearer."

But in another moment he had risen to his feet and was gesturing and pointing excitedly. "It's putting on sail!" he exclaimed. "It's heading toward the island. Don't you see?"

"You're right, by Heaven."

Taylor's eyes fastened on the sail with a consuming curiosity. "They see us," he murmured. "If only they can get here in time ..."

The two men started running swiftly down the beach toward the sea. "I think we're safe!" shouted Taylor. "We're out of it, completely. Good thing, though, we made an effort. We'd have been carried away if we hadn't. Like the sailors. They were carried away because—because they were dead. You were as helpless as a dead man. Good think I knocked you out."

A few minutes later they were clambering aboard a small sailing craft captained by a dark-skinned Oriental with sunken cheeks and small, shifty eyes.

"Bad island," he muttered, truculently, when he had recovered from his astonishment. "Bad island. Never go there. Strange things happen people go there. Never once come back. Bad island for men to go to."

The celerity with which he gave instructions for getting away, ordering his crew about as though they were vermin, bore eloquent testimony to the reality of his trepidation. He was profoundly agitated, as were Taylor and Harvey until a half mile of open sea stretched between their sun-scorched persons and the island of horror.



It Is Written

A reader returning the preference page for our Fall issue (No. 34) notes liking the cover but asks: "Which story does it illustrate?" and adds: "Would like to see some interior illustrations."

Mr. Virgil Finlay's black and white picture does not illustrate any story in the Fall issue of *MAGAZINE OF HORROR*, although it originally illustrated a story in another magazine, many years ago. This has been the case with most of our covers. Once in a while, however, as with the Fall issue of *STARTLING MYSTERY STORIES* (No. 17) it is possible to have an illustration for a story in the issue on the front cover. We have to be sure that the story is actually going to appear in the issue, so that means that we cannot select a scene to turn over to an artist until the issue is closed; it also means that sometimes a suitable scene for the purpose cannot be found, or that there is no time to go through the process in the first place, and we shall have to use something already at hand. So I can only say that we shall have covers illustrating stories in the issue whenever this proves feasible, but you cannot expect this to happen often.

So far as interior illustrations are concerned: Whenever there is an acceptable and available illustration for the story in the old magazines from which we draw it, we shall try to reproduce this illustration when we reprint the story. An issue, or even several successive issues, without any illustrations should not be taken to mean that we have changed our policy, but only that either there were no available illustrations for these stories on their

initial appearance, or that the illustrations just were not good enough—and, knowing your interest in the old artwork, we are not so fussy about it as we would be about new interior illustrations—or again it turned out to be impossible to get an acceptable reproduction of the originally-published artwork. I send every possible picture to the printer, along with the mss., making my final decision whether to use it or not when I see how it looks in proof. If a proof of the reproduction is not satisfactory—too dark, in general—then I do not take the chance with it, knowing that the picture will be still darker in the finished, printed copy you buy. I have frequently been disappointed thus, at not being able to use some illustrations that I believed you would appreciate seeing. It's a very tricky matter, and there is really no telling, from looking at the old magazines, which illustration will "take" with our process and which will not. Over the last few years, we have, however, been able to get reasonable reproduction of quite a variety of artwork, and now and then I have been delighted at how well something came out.

Kenneth W. Faig, Jr., writes from Joliet, Illinois: "*MAGAZINE OF HORROR* No. 34 was a good issue, thoroughly entertaining even if a little disappointing in relation to some of the excellent issues which immediately preceded it. The cover was very attractive, something achieved by MOH not quite so often.

"*The Headless Miller of Kobold's Keep* was by far the best story in the

issue. I liked the dark atmosphere and the setting of the story—quite similar to HPL's lesser tales. With a little better development in the climactic scene, this would have been an outstanding tale. *The Emergency Call* ranks second as a well-done treatment of a standard theme. *Feminine Magic* comes third—the usual entertaining Keller, but still lacking the force of his better-known fiction. *Bride of the Wind* ranks fourth—an imaginative tale, but much, much too abbreviated and lacking in necessary development. This tale should have been a novel! *The Whistling Corpse* I reluctantly place fifth—technically, a well-done tale but lacking in the development of the dark, brooding nature of the sea which makes William Hope Hodgson's works and F. Marion Crawford's *The Upper Berth* great.

"I enjoyed the Howard poem and am looking forward to his story, *The Grisly Horror*, in the Winter issue. The Howard pieces which are now being published for the first time are indeed secondary works, but for me they contain enough elements of his best fiction to be worthwhile. I, for one, would like to see some more of Howard's stories which were published back in the '20's and '30's, but outside the Conan, Kull, Kane and Bran Mak Morn sagas, now available in paperback for the most part. The synopses of Howard's tales published in *ORIENTAL STORIES* and *THE MAGIC CARPET* (as given in *The Conan Swordbook*, Mirage 1969) sound fascinating. Some of Howard's other adventure fiction, like the Steve Costigan series, might be appropriate for MOH or one of its companion magazines. Also, from the prefaces to the various volumes of the Lancer edition of the Conan saga, I gather that L. Sprague de Camp, Lin Carter, and Bjorn Nyberg are continuing work on further episodes of the Conan sage—might an occasional one of these

be had by MOH before book publication?

"I am glad to see that others are requesting stories by Clark Ashton Smith, and even more so to see that you will concentrate on stories from the first two Arkham House collections. I personally would prefer to see you skip the tales of Zothique, because of the recent publication by Ballantine, but I suppose that readers' requests must rule here. Might a special CAS issue of *MAGAZINE OF HORROR* be a possibility? I believe that past special issues of *FANTASY AND SCIENCE FICTION* have been very popular.

"In closing, thanks for your *Reminiscences on Seabury Quinn*, which was a very good summary of the work of this prolific author. I am looking forward to more of his best in *MAGAZINE OF HORROR* and *STARTLING MYSTERY STORIES*."

You must remember that Robert E. Howard turned out an immense volume of stories during his writing career, even though this came to just about eleven years. The sheer amount suggests that he was writing constantly—if not every day, then nearly every day, whether he was inspired or not, whether he was repeating himself or not, whether he felt like writing or not, and further there is little evidence that he did very much polishing or took the time to re-read published material (especially in relation to Conan) before starting a new story in a series. The result is, of course, a wide spectrum of quality, ranging from excellent weird tales to stories which read like an amateur caricature of Howard. I have run several previously unpublished tales, and have tried to keep in mind the desire of many readers to read a "new" Howard story, even if it was not among his best; in fact, one of the reasons why I held the last such one published so long was my feeling that

this (while not without a touch of the better Howard) really wasn't good enough. (The readers' comments show that some liked it very much while others thought it a mistake to publish.) A few I've decided just wouldn't do and returned; other editors felt differently which is all to the good; however just my opinions may be, they should not be final, outside of my own magazines!

Without in any way demeaning the ability of Messrs de Camp, Nyberg, and Carter (all three fine writers in their own material), I cannot say that I care much for their efforts to continue Conan—even though the love and care that Sprague brings to his contributions results in an absence of some of REH's typical faults, while retaining a number of the virtues. What is lacking in all of these is the passion and conviction you will find in even the poorer genuine Howard tales, as well as certain subtle elements of style which cannot be imitated with full life in them. Most of these stories have been good, as stories, but I cannot remember any which had the real flavor.

It is true that I had many requests for some of Clark Ashton Smith's Zothique tales before the Ballantine book came out, and had planned to use a few of them; but no one has asked for them since and, in fact, the recent pleas for Smith have specified the exclusion of the Zothique series, since these are really available now. So I shan't consider using any of them for some years at the very earliest; much depends upon how well the Ballantine collection sells, and whether it does well enough to encourage the publishers to keep it available.

Charles Hidley writes from Pa: "You know, I groan inwardly each time that I see Poe's name on a contents page—because one has read everything of

his, and more than once—but the turnabout is that the stories are always a joy and seem fresh with each re-reading. I collect illustrated editions of Poe ... and thought I'd read them through but, to my astonishment, *MAGAZINE OF HORROR* has introduced me to *Ligeia* for the first time (I kept waiting for him to pull out her teeth!). Such superb writing—even the commas have an especial poetry.

"*Back Before the Moon* was easily number one in this particular issue: the Spanish rhythm in the 'translation' and the simplicity and humbleness so aptly evoked through repetition, as well as the quite chilling aura of awful and natural evil, gave this story a quality just a bit unique in my reading.

"Smith's concept of a mating ghoul is one of the most visceral and obscene in my almost 40 years as a reader of this genre. The sustained terror throughout was artful and the ending could not have been more perfect. (You may imagine how constantly those first three yarns jostled for first place: the 'zero' is merely a cop-out for the 'classic,' and Smith and Barker should really tie.)

"I appreciate the multi-leveled nature of *The Road to Nowhere*—less so its archness—and, as in most of the RAWL stories I've read, it's rather like three-dimensional chess. And marvellously suited for re-reading. The ambiance of the 'Village' and the menu (with a diet like that you can't be the skinny guy I last spoke to in 1944) was most appreciated by this exile.

"The characterization in *Camera Obscura* seemed particularly vivid and apt—for some mad reason I kept 'feeling' the protagonist in Kipling's *The Light that Failed*—and in any other issue would no doubt have been first.

"All in all a gorgeous, though illustrationless, 'issue. But I am feeling the strain of so many short stories and find that I have difficulty recalling

only a few issues back. Let's have some longer, serialized things soon.

"On review, one sees now the possible inspiration for your editorial: the insistent quality and shimmering style of most of the writing in the issue."

So—you confused *Ligeia* with *Berenice*, eh? Actually, several of Poe's tales have just enough similarities so that if you haven't read them for a long time, it's very easy to get them mixed up. But you have underlined very well part of my reason for running *Ligeia*: I was sure that among the contingent of readers who'd groan at the sight of the name, there would be some who found that they actually had never read the story at all, before, as you did. Have you really read *everything* by EAP? I haven't, and a fair amount of it is either unobtainable for me or not very rewarding; but a much higher percentage is rewarding than most people assume. I discovered this upon reading volume one of the annotated, complete works (this volume dedicated to the poetry) prepared by the late Thomas Ollive Mabbott; and if it is true of the poetry, much of which I had never read before, then it is probably true of the tales, sketches, essays, and critical writings.

Your mention of the punctuation reminds me that there is a special problem with many of Poe's tales in that they exist in several versions, details differing mostly in punctuation. Upon reading through the version of *Ligeia* that I planned to use, I found one sentence that did not make sense at all, and several where the sense was rather dubious. Checking this word-for-word against the Viking edition, I found that the first instance was due to a misprint, while the others were a matter of punctuation, mostly; and, in fact, there was a rather consistent difference in punctuation in the Viking edition which suggested recent editorial work rather

than a slightly different version from Poe himself, who nearly always did some revisions for each separate printing of tale or poem. What I did, in the end, was to follow the older edition except in the few instances suggested above.

No, I'm far from being "skinny" these days, although I do expect to shed some thirty pounds between this moment (August 14) and the end of the year, via the high protein-low carbohydrate process popularly known as the "drinking man's diet", which I have employed with safety, comfort, and reasonable enjoyment in past periods of surplus poundage. So my lunches at *Il Bambino's* needs must be somewhat simplified for the duration.

I had to look up the word "arch" to see if I agreed with you that this quality has been in my recent revisions of earlier stories (it's one of those epithets that I've found frequently in criticism of performances of music, but was too lazy to check upon); and I must allow that I agree with you. In a sense most of these recent revisions have been experiments in that everything (well, nearly; it's just possible that something here or there was inadvertent), however odd its appearance, is there as it is deliberately, for the purpose of achieving a certain over-all effect—not necessarily the same effect in each story. I cannot tell—I, least of all—whether the experiments have been successful, or granting success in relation to my intent, the stories are good, or as good as the earlier versions. The response from the active readers has varied from enthusiastic acceptance to blunt rejection, with just about all the stops in between, and this has pleased me very much. I'm vain enough to enjoy the unqualified praise, but cynical enough to prefer the more qualified comments, and some of the outright attacks certainly have made points.

The Clark Ashton Smith "special" sounds like a good idea, but I doubt that

it would work out well; in any event, the cost would be too much for us under present circumstances.

The editorial is very rarely "inspired" by a story in the particular issue, as most often I cannot be sure as to just which stories sent off to the printer will fit; and it frequently happens that a story run in one issue will have been set up for an earlier one sometimes one of the other titles. Further, the editorial is usually done before I have completely laid out an issue for the printer. So the apparent tie-in with the stories this time was no more than coincidence, though a happy one.



John Parker writes from Virginia: "The Road to Nowhere was a real problem for me. The framework—the story inside a story about a story—kind of got me, and also I just could not understand it. I remembered what you said in *BIZARRE FANTASY TALES* No. 1: 'Some stories will be obscure to you or me simply because we do not grasp what they are about,' so I re-read the story. Even though I had recently read Whitehead's *The Trap*, I really missed the theme of your story until the second reading. Whitehead's story was so naked and obvious, whereas yours was so well-clothed and 'unobvious'; both stories had the same theme—travel into another dimension. Finally I understood what you meant when you said in the

introduction to the story that you 'deliberately picked the stalest, most worn-out themes.' You did succeed very well in giving the theme a new life.

"By now, about two dozen people have probably written to tell you that your copyright data for *The Nameless Offspring* is wrong—*West India Lights* being a collection of stories by Henry S. Whitehead, and *The Abominations of Yondo* being the correct Smith collection. Two dozen and one have now told you. *The Nameless Offspring* is typically fine Smith. I have just about gotten to the point where I like Smith better than Lovecraft. When I read a story by Lovecraft, the narrator and the narration are what stick in my mind; when I read a story by Smith, the plot and atmosphere are the elements I remember.

"Poe's narrator is very similar to Lovecraft's narrator—a very sensitive 'I' (sometimes nervous and distraught). It is this element of emotion in Poe and Lovecraft which is mainly lacking in the narrator ('I') of Smith's tales. The narrator of *Ligeia* fairly quivers with nervous emotion and tension. Although overlong and wordy, *Ligeia* is a suspenseful tale.

"*Back Before the Moon* was neither frightening or gruesome, and only slightly bizarre. It was a kind of religious mystery-adventure story. I liked it. The sprinkling of Spanish words and phrases gave it a nice flavor. It reminded me of the old Adolph Menjou series. *My Favorite Story*, which presented a good number of similar stories (mystery-adventure).

"*The Bride Well* was the first of the *Tales From Cornwall* that I have read. I felt like I had come in at the end of a movie. The story had no suspense, mystery, and very little interest. It was a slight little piece. Perhaps a Conan fan might like it.

"*Camera Obscura* is an outstandingly poor story. The theme is poorly developed. No sympathy is developed for the narrator; he seems like a prig. His dislike for Marianne is not really explained successfully. Neither character acts in a believable manner. The narration is awkward. The author apparently forgot his narrator is writing in 1871, as he uses the word 'surrealistic' (page 22), which is a comparatively modern word..."

I agree that *The Bride Well* is rather a slight story, but I believe you might find it more enjoyable should you re-read it in its context of the entire *Tales From Cornwall*, or at least within its context of the tales preceding it. This is, of course, one of the pitfalls of running an evolutionary series of stories in a magazine; late comers may very well get the feeling of having walked in at the closing scenes of a movie.

You may be somewhat over-harsh upon *Camera Obscura*—and have you checked to see exactly how far back the word 'surrealism' really goes? I'll admit that I have not, and further admit that I did not really notice it (although, Lord knows, I read the story at least four times). But such a check might surprise you, although it could confirm you.

As you'll see below, other readers felt differently about the story.

P. J. Andrews writes: "If Ted H. Strauss' is a new author, by all means encourage him. *Camera Obscura* projects a very fine feeling for a past age and gets across its horror with admirable economy considering the lengths to which actual 19th century writers often went to obtain similar effects. The casual mention of a discussion of 'Poe's scandalous drunken behavior in Richmond during the summer' is equal to a thousand words of careful

scene-setting which might not have come off; this puts the reader right into proper place and time, emotionally, for he can feel a pity for Poe that neither the narrator or the others likely did. All in all a fine job, and to my mind just below the best in the issue."

Henry R. Sobreski writes from Detroit, Michigan: "I was not very impressed with the stories in the Fall MOH. The only story that really kept my interest was *The Whistling Corpse*. The only other story that gave the Pendarves story any competition was the Ashkenazy yarn. I wonder if Mr. Ashkenazy is any relation to the great Russian pianist, Vladimir Ashkenazy.

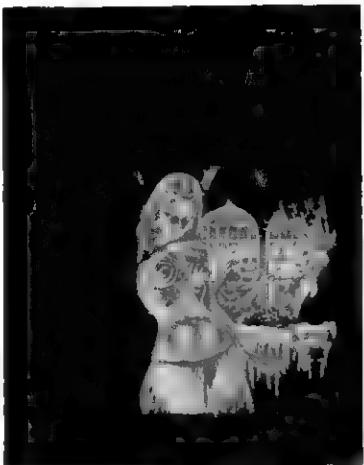
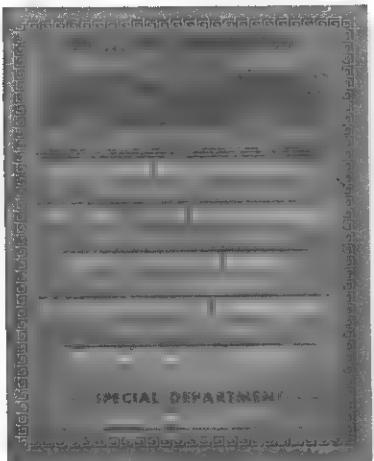
"*Bride of the Wind* and *Feminine Magic* are right out of a fairyland. *The Emergency Call*—not horror or terror, but a fine story.

"I enjoyed your *Reminiscences on Seabury Quinn*. The article was better than some of the stories, a fine job on your part.

"I'm glad to see a Finlay cover on MOH, as always, a fine cover."

And I'm glad to hear from a reader who enjoyed *The Whistling Corpse*, which has not received much favor so far. I, too, have wondered whether there were any connection between the two Ashkenazy's, as the "name is not particularly common—in these parts, at least. Sorry you didn't care for the rest of the stories, aside from the Brandon, which you praise; part of the editor's burden this issue is that other readers have high praise for the stories you considered inferior.

Some time back, you and I exchanged opinions on Shustakovich. Have you heard the recording of his 1st and 9th symphonies, by Horvat, on Turnabout records? Inexpensive, and, to my ears, the finest performance of both that I've yet heard.



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